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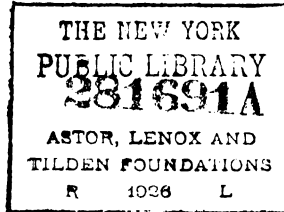
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PROLOGUE

"JANE HAWKER, who was found murdered in a copse near Ash Hollow, was buried on Friday. A subscription, headed by the Vicar, has been started for her widowed mother, who was quite dependent on her. There is at present no clue to the perpetrators of the outrage. All the circumstances tend towards the theory that the crime was committed by some tramp on the way to Pidgwick Fair. The copse in which the body was found forms a short cut from Ash Hollow to Pidgwick, and is much used during the summer months; it lies so low in wet weather that it is almost impassable."

"I told that girl to keep the *Mid-Sussex* out of the way," Mrs. Gatley was saying wrathfully. "It don't do you no good to read things like that jest now. I can't read nor write myself, and I don't know as I misses much."

She took the paper from the limp hand of the other woman. This woman was young, and in favourable circumstances might have passed for good-looking; just now, circumstances were against her.

She was lying on a capacious black sofa beneath the open window. It was of the old-fashioned sort, that will serve for a bed in emergency. The horsehair was slit in places; the gashes yawned and showed the coarse, greasy sacking beneath. It was a sofa that

accorded well enough with the rest of the room, which was dingy and smacked of a not-distant past. The solid chairs, the square table, and worn carpet were just old enough to be depressing.

But had the furniture of the Five Yew parlour dated from the classicism of Queen Anne, or been contemporary with the house, which was late Tudor, it would have been all the same to Rosalie Wicken. Evidences of *her* taste, weak hints of what she would do, given opportunity, existed in the crochet antimacassars which sprawled across the chair backs, in a poor ornament or so under a glass shade, and in the incongruous long white curtains at the windows.

These windows were wide and shallow, with small square panes set in lead, and generous inside ledges on which to stand flower-pots. But there were no glowing geraniums or drooping fuchsias at Rosalie's casements; only a couple of plaster figures under glass—of Christ and the Virgin. There was a window at each end of the long, low-pitched room. They made an undesirable cross-light; young Mrs. Wicken had not considered that, but complained peevishly of constant draught, and padded the chinks with strips of list and scarlet-covered sand-bags. She was nearly always cold.

In front the land was rough pasture: big, undulating stretches of brownish-green, blotched here and there by cows, and shut in by a rim of watchful hills. These hills were violet, and seemed to brood over the house, with its yellow plaster and grey beams, that night—Mrs. Gatley said it meant rain. Sometimes the hills were wrapped in mist; sometimes they were very far away; sometimes the sun rested on them with strange

effect. Rosalie knew all their moods and found them equally melancholy.

Out of the other window — she had but to turn her head — the land was arable. It was August, and harvest-time. The sheaves stood there, in bundles of eight or ten, leaning together, and silently eloquent of plenty. She looked at her pale plaster Christ on the ledge and thought of his Sabbath walk through just such a field. She was morbidly religious at the best of times, and now, if ever, was the time to garner all one's pious emotions. She looked at the hills again as she screwed herself painfully up on the slippery sofa. The sea was beyond those hills — the sea which was just a pleasant adjunct to the fashionable watering places, where one could get novels at twopence a volume and sit at the window and watch the people; or on the parade and hear the band; or on the beach and snigger genteelly at the niggers. She thought tearfully — she was in constant tears just now — that she could have borne what was coming; the misery that was inevitable, the torture that grew more near with every moment, better in a town.

Her eyes rested on the garden. There was a bit filched from the pasture and fenced from the cattle with a rude oak fence. She was indifferent to flowers — except to wear or carry as a bouquet on gala occasions. But some one, dead perhaps, or simply gone elsewhere, had loved the ground once, and the ground had not forgotten. The beds were gay with phloxes — the rosy bloom turning purple, the white brown — perennial sunflowers, evening primroses, which seeded faithfully year after year, pink thrift above the stone

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4 THE MATERNITY OF HARRIOTT WICKEN

edging, roses gone wild for want of pruning, marigolds and nasturtiums everywhere; at the wall, white everlasting pea and ivy. Beyond the fence was a great barn, in a very dilapidated condition, and with a moss and lichen covered roof of Horsham stone.

"Tell me all about that girl, Jane Hawker," she said, with the weak imperiousness of a semi-invalid. "You shouldn't have told the servant to keep the *Mid-Sussex* out of my way: it makes me look like a child — as if I were not mistress in my own house. Such a house! Anything that stops me from thinking does me good — yes, even a murder. I like murders. I wish we were in the village, instead of being buried alive here: I should have heard all the gossip. I should have watched the funeral go by. Poor thing! Did I ever see her?"

The elder woman turned from the open hearth. There were logs burning across the plain iron dogs, although the night was so sultry and the casements were flung back to their furthest hooks. Round the fire she had drawn a tall airing "horse," and was busily occupied in hanging thereon and turning about various garments of flannel and cambric. The flannel was new, but the cambric, which was cobwebby fine, had a yellow tinge. Every time she took a garment in her strong hands there was a quiver of tenderness about her mouth: it was a drawn, tight-lipped mouth, like a puckered seam, such as mothers of heavy families often get. She turned her smooth grey head and apple-skinned face towards the sofa.

"There ain't much to tell — poor gal! She was to ha' been married come Club Day, but there was ne'er a cottage on the estate for them to live in, and a man must

bide near his work. He's helper in the stables up at the big house — Walt Buckhurst: they've walked together since last harvest-time. They do say there was reasons for hurryin' on the weddin'. But I won't believe it of poor Jane. And if it was so, she wa'n't the first by a many."

She broke off abruptly, and knelt at the hearth with the tongs of Sussex iron in her hand, to rearrange the logs, which had burned through the middle and were smouldering and smoking on the bricks.

"Did I ever see her? Which copse was it?"

"The copse where the 'daffs' grow. They say the new bailiff is agen us going after they old 'daffs.' Many's the clothes-basketful I've picked and sent by the carrier into market; with them and, a bit later, cowslips, poor folk may turn a penny."

Rosalie leaned on her elbow.

"The copse where the daffodils grow! It is quite near. Why, Heber goes through it every week on market days. He never misses Pidgwick: he likes the life and change." Her voice was bitter. "He must have gone through when she was lying there."

"Sure!" assented the other, saying the word in the drawling, sibilant way that was usual. "And so he did, and see nothing. It was the keeper come across her."

"Did I ever see her?" asked Rosalie again.

"Sure! She come with damsons; poor Miss' Hawker have got a beautiful tree out her back, and sells a many for preservin'. Ah! the last time I bought a gallon, Jane give me twopence short in my change. But I always says that them as cheats me cheats themselves."

She laughed, as if at a rare joke, turned to the fire,

gave the little garments a final turn, and then crossed to the sofa with a professional air. Rosalie had fallen back; the flush had died down in her cheeks. She looked queerly grey and pinched. The other viewed her with a matron's sage eye.

"You'd best get upstairs, my dear," she said significantly. "I've got your bed all ready, and I've made up one for Master Heber over the cheese-room. The stump's in yours. I shall sleep on it to-night, if I lays down at all. But I never reckons to take off my clothes until after the third day."

Rosalie began to be stirred by a chill, horrible excitement. The grey tinge fixed on her face; she stared up at the fresh-skinned woman with lurking terror. She was a wistful-looking creature—all eyes and thin, pointed nose, like a terrier.

Mrs. Gatley took the garments from the "horse" to her arms: they smelt warm of the fire.

"Keep up your heart," she said cheerily. "You ain't the first: I've had sixteen. Why, we all has to go through with it, dearie—it's the lot of woman. Single ones has 'em, so married ones must expect." She gave her hearty laugh. "I never knew any one so down—not even my 'Meliar with her twins. You must think of what's a-comin' after."

She bustled out of the room with her warm burden of garments. When she was alone, young Mrs. Wicken looked out with agonised intensity at the hills; she suddenly developed an affection for them and for the slippery sofa—to-morrow, and for many dreary, weak to-morrows, she would be upstairs. Her face kept growing paler; once she gave a long, sick shudder.

Then she got up slowly and walked to the looking-glass. It hung over the hearth and was low and long; the frame of wood, carved and gilded; the glass divided irregularly into three by slim, gilded pillars. It was ridiculously old-fashioned, but at least it was gilt and had the flavour of a fashionable parlour—it made a glint within those dull walls.

She surveyed herself very critically and at leisure. During the last few hours her face had grown old, almost unrecognisable. Then she experienced a new and disturbing sensation; while it lasted she cared nothing for looks. Directly she felt better, she went to the door and called out guardedly, —

“Annie.”

There was a clatter of pots, a sluice of dish-water, and the sound of a pump worked by a vigorous arm. A full voice was singing, briskly and out of tune, the comic song which had been greatly in vogue in towns three years before. These sounds gave way to dragging feet across the stones, and a hearty, slatternly maid appeared.

“I want last week’s *Mid-Sussex*.”

The girl hesitated, remembering Mrs. Gatley’s mandate. Then, reflecting mutinously that this drawn-faced woman on the parlour threshold was her “real missis,” she did as she was bid. As she went back to her pots and her pump she threw a glance of interest and compassion at Rosalie, who walked slowly to the sofa.

She felt a gruesome interest in this murder of Jane Hawker. She remembered the girl: standing in a dark skirt and a print blouse on the garden path between the spiked delphiniums and holding a basketful

of purple plums. She was a pretty girl : it was dreadful to think of her lying in that cavernous copse where the daffodils bloomed by the thousand every spring. She curled up on the horsehair and read with avidity every gruesome detail. Mrs. Gatley was moving heavily overhead — like an officer of the Inquisition preparing the torture-chamber. Anything was better than thinking — of what was well on the way ; of what Night would bring. She was such a coward, and so in the dark. This was the first time. When one had been through it sixteen times like Mrs. Gatley and so many of the country-women, it would be just an incident — rather tiresome, still but an incident all the same. But she didn't know — that was the horror of it.

“The murderer had apparently dragged the body some distance from the path into the thicket of sapling oaks. The keeper was guided to the spot by a well-defined track of blood. The throat was most brutally — ”

There were uncertain steps outside : Rosalie gave a startled gasp. She let the paper fall to the ground, and nervously watched the door. A man stumbled in. He did not seem to see her : the room was growing dim, the sheaves in the harvest-field were pallid. She watched him as she crouched on the sofa ; she seemed half afraid, half disgusted. The long look she fixed on him as he staggered to a chair and relapsed into stupor told the whole volume of her life for the last two years.

Mrs. Gatley came in, and, seeing him, was about to make off. But Rosalie beckoned.

“Don't go,” she said aloud, as the woman tiptoed to her side. “Don't trouble to keep quiet. Nothing we can say will disturb him. Look !”

She flung out her arm with unstudied action towards the chair on which he was lolling, his black unshaven chin on his breast, his hands hanging limply down, his lower lip protruding.

"Drunk!" she said, with a coolness and calm acceptance which were much more impressive and piteous than mere temper would have been. "Drunk! To-night — of all nights."

Mrs. Gatley took the hot quivering hand in her own hard ones — strangely enough, *she* looked at the figure in the chair tenderly.

"It's *because* it's to-night," she whispered soothingly. "He's anxious. Ain't it natural? Some flies to drink at these times — my man always did. And he," she nodded her head with the sleek grey bands in the direction of the chair, "can't help it at any time. I know the Wickens, my dear, and love 'em all as if they was my own. I nussed him; I was with his mother, like I'm with you, on much such a night as this. Many's the stitch I've set in them little things that he wore, and that his baby will wear before many more hours is over our heads. He brought you here so as I might be with you. He loves his old nurse, God bless him, and he's fond of you — when the drink's out. His father was the same, and his before him, most like. They can't help it. It's in the blood. Bad blood, the Wicken blood, every drop of it — and yet as kind! They was real gentlefolk. There was Wickens at the Hall — well up in the world when I was a girl. He was born at the Hall. Little I thought to see a Wicken born at the Five Yew. All tarred with the same brush — men and women. Drink — like

him," she bobbed her head towards the unheeding figure, "and sometimes worse. There's been idiots and fits and bad women — married and single. There's a Wicken in the County Asylum now — his uncle. I mind him well enough in my young days, afore the finger of God touched him. Sure I do! Such a spark was Master Heber!" She gave a sly, tenderly reminiscent simper. "They're nearly all Hebers, the men, and Harriotts the women."

She had been telling it volubly, in a rapid, husky whisper, but suddenly she broke off, half rose and mechanically smoothed her linen apron.

"He's stirring. I'll go now. He's not had much — the Wickens can't stand much — but he'll be nasty when he comes round. That's *his* way; there's others so lovin' that it turns you sick!"

Rosalie had been giving awed attention to her whispering. She looked at her husband as he moved. How proud she had been of him! Not over fond, but proud — because he was a gentleman. Why had not some one told her about this bad Wicken blood before? Why had she not been warned? Why had it been left to an old nurse to open her eyes when it was too late, when she was helpless in this lonely, rat-ridden house?

She had been so proud to marry a gentleman. She recalled their first meeting, on the jetty at Margate, when he had introduced himself and she had met his advances with a tingling sense of wickedness and triumph mingled. But, after all, her sister Amy had done better. Her husband was a rising young City man, her home was half a villa, very spick and span,

with lodgers—most desirable—in the drawing-rooms. It was just a step from Kennington Oval. Such a nice part!

She caught Mrs. Gatley's apron and pulled her on to the edge of the sofa again. She was afraid to be left alone with him. She wanted a hand to hold. The local paper's spiced account of the murder had got on her nerves; the very sounds outside—of swallows under the deep eaves, of the gloomy nightjar, of the retriever in the kennel—made her heart throb. She looked beyond the garden and the fields. By straining, she could just see the clump of oaks marking the descent to the copse. She pictured the girl lying cold and mutilated in the oak scrub. Such a gash across her throat—the head nearly severed from the body.

It had been a graceful head; she remembered coveting the elaborate plaits of chestnut hair.

Heber Wicken stirred in the chair again and muttered.

"Don't leave me: I am afraid," besought Rosalie, as her companion tried to twitch her apron free. "I—I— What was that he said? You hear? What does he— Not near me! Keep between us. Oh! not drink this time—not only drunk—I—"

She dropped back almost fainting, but her prominent brown eyes never ceased their terrified searching of her husband's face. He was coming unsteadily towards the sofa. His eyes were very bright and bloodshot: they glowed like the eyes of a cruel beast; his hands, held a little in front of him, made strange movements in the air.

The newspaper which his wife had let slip to the

floor attracted his attention. He pounced on it with an uncanny air of glee—like a child on a long-coveted toy or a lithe cat in pursuit of some forbidden dainty. He picked it up eagerly, turned to the report of the tragedy, stared at it with a wide, vacant smile for a moment, and then, throwing it down, thrust his face forward and gave a laugh.

They watched him. Rosalie seemed hypnotised; she could not even feel the dull, slow pain which had gripped her first as she stood at the glass, and had been coming at regular intervals ever since. Her eyes fixed on him, she looked more like a poor little helpless terrier than ever. He tilted back his head. They saw him draw his forefinger across his throat in a curved clean sweep, and then he laughed again.

“Charming girl! Neat job! The fools! They little think that I— How she tore and struggled—like a tiger! Heavy to drag into cover. My knife—Rosalie!”

Rosalie gave a sharp cry and stood painfully on her feet. He threw a muddled glance at the swaying, unwieldy figure in a grey alpaca gown with wide, loose sleeves, sweeping skirt, and row after row of narrow black velvet at every hem. The white chemisette and wristbands of worked muslin made her skin look waxy yellow.

He was dazed; he watched the two women go out of the room. Rosalie was leaning on the nurse's breast heavily. At the door she turned her head and gave him a last glance of absolute terror and revulsion.

He sat down by the hearth again and smiled complacently from time to time. The logs were black and

the blinding wood smoke lapped out in thin curled tongues from the chimney. There was a crumpled heap of white stuff on the floor; it had dropped from the "horse." He took it in his hands and turned it about in bewilderment; an odd-shaped travesty of a shirt, all flaps and microscopic stitches. It puzzled him; he frowned, not remembering what it meant. At last he tore it up thoughtfully, into thin strips. He listened dully to sounds overhead — unwonted sounds, a long continual moaning; flying feet on the stairs. By-and-by he heard a horse's hoofs outside; the dog barked, the gate swung back, there was a brisk tip-tap of heels on the brick path. He sat smiling all the time, a smile of absolute foolish satisfaction. He heard the rain swish on the stones, and the grateful smell of wet garden mould came in at the open window. Soon afterwards there was a passionate, strangled cry in the room above, and suggestive silence.

Upstairs, Mrs. Gatley was giving a new Wicken, in spite of itself, its first toilette. At midnight, Rosalie, done for ever with the black sofa and the brooding, fitful hills that shut her off from the sea, and the joys of niggers, and the circulating library, was growing cold in her bed; her sharp pointed nose severely outlined, and her eyes — the horror had never gone out of them — closed on an unsatisfactory world.

CHAPTER I

"I THINK it is all going off well," Mrs. Megson said.

She bumped herself down into one of the bewilderingly draped wicker easy-chairs, and indulged in the worried, torture-chamber sort of smile permitted to a middle-aged hostess with a social function on her mind.

"I'll have a cup of tea and, Dr. Owens, you'll take one too? They'll be dropping in for refreshments after this 'set.' I do hope they are enjoying themselves. Did they look as if they were thoroughly enjoying themselves? I'm so anxious that this party shall be a success. We've secured the Bellamy-Bristowes for the first time. Such 'tony' people, Dr. Owens: Mr. Megson knows him in the City. The lady in the grass lawn dress, lined with green—only green sateen; I should have thought that a person in her position—heaps of money, you know—would have run to silk. But these well-off people are often like that. I hope she was quite polite to you, Dr. Owens. These swell people are haughty, of course, and—"

She snipped off her sentence abruptly and put out her hand for his cup. She was relieved to see that he did not seem offended. Those brown eyes of his were as meek and inscrutable as ever.

"I wonder if she has seen to the sandwiches"—
"she" always stood for the over-worked housemaid with Mrs. Megson—"and the claret cup; people appreciate

that on a day like this. And the ices! We haven't had ices before, but, as I told Mr. Megson, they are absolutely necessary if you wish to entertain in style. Such a fuss, these big parties: I suppose you don't have them in Montgomery? Ah! I know the country" — she gave a thick shiver, which shook all the lace and bead trimming on her elaborate bodice — "and things are so different. Of course you wouldn't give an entertainment like this in a country place," she repeated, emphasising the deficiency and throwing him an eloquent look from her high social altitude. "And just as well, too, I'm sure. A good position has its drawbacks."

She took a gulp of strong tea with a generous blob of cream on the surface.

There was a girl in the room — a rather unusual-looking girl. She was sprawling in a low chair, close to the brown and green wicker tea-table with the ledges, and she was eating rich cakes, of sorts, with an air of business. She stole a quizzical glance at Dr. Owen Owens. He met it sternly; he hated to laugh at anybody — also, he was working up a young practice and Mr. Megson was inclined to liver and Mrs. Megson to hysteria. He was particularly keen on working up his practice because the great dread of his life was being compelled to go back to Montgomeryshire, where his father was parish doctor to a dozen little lonely hamlets. He drank his tea solemnly — with the terrible solemnity that covers a laugh.

The girl shrugged and helped herself to a macaroon into which she bit fiercely. She fixed her eyes contemptuously on Mrs. Megson, taking in all the details of

that well-meaning woman's toilette with ineffable intolerance. The very wide parting from which the greasy, pepper-and-salt hair was drawn; the pearly teeth, so suspiciously faultless; the big quivering bust under the fussy bodice; the handkerchief spread on the ample lap—a handkerchief all lace border and opopanax—irritated her. She got up with another shrug and walked to the French window. The doctor's eyes followed her wistfully. They were short-sighted eyes; they seemed to be always pathetically asking for tolerance and recognition. It was quite an unconscious expression; he had a supreme confidence in himself, still he was always grateful for any attention; the fact that he was a Welshman seemed to depress him. He knew nothing of London, because when he was at the hospital he had been studious and lodged quietly on the Surrey side, and now he had a practice it was in Brixton. So he fully believed that Mrs. Megson was a society woman—although he had never come across her name in the newspapers; and he also believed that Brixton was the hub of the fashionable world, and the *Bon Marché* the place where aristocratic women came to shop. Some people are born suburban. When he came to London from Montgomery he drifted to the suburbs quite naturally.

He accepted every invitation to Gammeridge Gardens, and the Megsons for their part were glad to have him. It was a commercial household; Mrs. Megson made a great fuss over the shy young doctor and told everybody in a harsh whisper which carried a couple of yards that he was a "professional man."

The girl was still by the French window. She was leaning her shoulder against the glass, and she had

stretched up her arms so that the sleeves of her muslin blouse made a frame for her face. She looked at the tea-table, and then she gave a short, hot gasp as if the room and those two in it were choking her. She was asking herself what made her mother so unbearably vulgar. The very way she talked was unbearable—rolling her tongue, and clicking it against the roof of her mouth. It was a sound like punching tram-tickets. How maddening all these Brixton people were! Outside there must be something better, something quite different. If only one could get away from it! Even Owen, in his tennis flannels and with his big hairy hands awkwardly holding his tea-cup, looked swarthy and coarse. Why would he persist in touching himself up so gaudily? What a crude band of bright green ribbon round his straw hat! These people that she met daily and had been meeting all her life were in the wrong key.

Owen looked at her. It was a look of speculation, rendered faintly imbecile by intense affection. He made up his mind at that moment: he had been weighing matters for some time. She looked pretty to-day and, what was more important, she looked normal. To be normal, that was the one necessary thing in a woman—to be just like other women. Sometimes he had feared that Harriott was not. It was time he made up his mind: a wife was as necessary to a young medical man as a consulting-room.

"Come out and have some tennis," she said abruptly.

"No, dear. Dr. Owens would rather stay in here with me," put in Mrs. Megson, with an ill-concealed air of conspiracy.

Harriott shrugged for the third time, and then she flushed painfully. No doubt her mother wanted to consult him on the cheap. She was a tremendous believer in getting a return for her hospitality: the sort of woman to prefer tea and supper invitations to afternoon calls, complaining that the latter was so formal and did not pay for tram-fare and the fuss of putting on your bonnet.

When she was alone with the young man Mrs. Megson wriggled on her chair and drew her breath through her nose. The doctor was "taken" with Harriott. She and Mr. Megson had discussed it in the bedroom — their usual ground for grave debate and argument. They agreed that he ought to be spoken to. Mr. Megson was not one to believe in shilly-shallying. He had ordered her to bring the affair to a climax. That was just Mr. Megson all over, she was thinking mutinously. If there was anything unpleasant to be done, he shelved it on to her. When a tradesman had to be grumbled at or beaten down, she did it; but when there was a big account to be paid, Mr. Megson dropped in on his way to the City and left the cheque himself, in a magnificently careless and occasional way.

She stared helplessly at the doctor, and then she feebly offered him an almond cake.

"Though I am afraid they are not up to much," she said, drawing her mouth into an expression of resignation; it was one of her delusions to think it "good form" to depreciate everything you offered a guest.

She watched him with painful intensity. Then she wiped a greasy crumb from her lap with such a flourish of her smart handkerchief that the room reeked of

scent. She got out the family album as a good way of leading up. Of course if he was going to marry Harriott he would have to be told sooner or later.

He followed the photographs through docilely, noticing that every time she turned a leaf she turned it more slowly, as if something monstrous lurked at the end of the book. He could hear the tennis-players and see the nets and the August sun and the bit of blue sky. He was longing to go out and find Harriott, but he followed the wooden faces and outlandish costumes politely. Mrs. Megson gave a running commentary on the family history as she pointed out the family features.

"That's Mr. Megson's cousin John, who died on the way home from India, and that's his sister Ethel, who married badly, poor soul. We don't have her here for parties, although she lives quite near, in the Vercomphit Road, but she comes at Christmas. Mr. Megson won't have her husband inside the door, for he says that a fellow who can't keep his wife and children properly must be a scamp. And that's Cousin Sarah on my side. And that's my poor sister Rose."

She paused impressively at the photograph of a slight, white woman in a gown with bell sleeves. A frail, sad soul, who was startlingly like Harriott. She seemed to stare up from the card with wistful, imploring eyes. She was not a pretty woman: the face was pointed and the small head overweighted with false hair.

"Poor Rosalie!" Mrs. Megson put the family album on the mahogany what-not, now that it had served its purpose and rung in the tragedy. "I should like to tell you all about her."

He bowed gravely, wondering all the time what she supposed her dead sister Rosalie had to do with him, and worrying lest Harriott should be flirting with the man three doors down, who was a dashing young stock-broker and had left the City early that day in honour of the Megsons' party.

"She married into a county family," Mrs. Megson continued, with an air of importance. "Of course you know what that means, Dr. Owens; no doubt you have gentlemen's seats in Wales. Yes, a county family. The Wickens, of the Hall, Barley Bridge, Sussex. They had been very well-off people, and, as Mr. Megson always says, it isn't what you have been, but what you are; but you know how some families come down."

She gave a little aggressive laugh and continued. "When poor Rosalie picked Heber up he was just loafing about at Margate in very pokey lodgings, and the family mansion had been sold. He took my sister into the country when Harriott was expected, so that an old nurse, who was with the family for many years before she married, might be with her."

"So Miss Megson is not Miss Megson," he said rather ludicrously.

"Oh, no! Harriott is no daughter of ours," Mrs. Megson assured him. "But she seems just like our own child, and she knows nothing of what I am going to tell you. Let girls be light-hearted while they are single, is what I always say. There are worries enough in later life," she added reflectively, wondering if there were enough cold chickens for supper, and fidgeting over the trifle, which was always a speculation.

"And you see," she went on, with an air of confidence,

"my sister died when the baby was born. I fancy she had a shock, from what the nurse said. A most superior person — you never hear of servants like that nowadays. It is all this dreadful School Board. Mr. Megson is always writing to the papers about the atrocious way we are taxed. And he says there isn't even a free press in England, for they never put his letters in."

The doctor's gentle eyes were strained, and he fixed them on Mrs. Megson anxiously. That sentence of hers, "let girls be light-hearted while they are single," was ominous. He was afraid of what was coming. There was certainly something more coming, because she kept flourishing that scented handkerchief in a nervous, jerky way. At last she said, with a sort of courageous plunge:—

"The Wickens were a queer lot. Rosalie's husband — although *quite* a gentleman — drank. Of course I shouldn't mention it to most people, but you are a doctor, and just like one of our ourselves —"

She broke off — to roll up the handkerchief and blow her nose energetically.

The doctor's face looked greenish, his eyes grew steely, and his thick lips pouted sullenly, as they always did when he was wrestling with any sort of problem.

"The nurse told me they had all been queer — every Wicken had gone wrong in some way — I mean they were born wrong. One had epileptic fits — and another — oh, dreadful things! I can't remember half — it made me feel quite faint — *you* know my constitution. Her old mistress, Heber's mother, lost ever so many babies in infancy. I always think that is so hard. Heber himself (that was Rosalie's husband) certainly

drank to excess. The old woman said it was in the blood. Such nonsense! As if it were rheumatism. Now that *does* run in families; Mr. Megson's mother was eaten up with it. However, *he* came to a bad — "

She put on the brake. She was suddenly vexed with herself for having said so much. Mr. Megson always said that her great fault was saying too much. This young doctor invited confidence; his manners were so unassuming that you were apt to forget that he was a comparative stranger. Still, he was going to marry Harriott, so it was only right that he should know all about her people. County people, too, which would certainly be in her favour. She wanted him to marry Harriott; but she was made uneasy by a vague change and embarrassment in his manner.

"I mean," she said more stiffly, "that he died quite suddenly."

A faint colour came into her cheeks when she remembered how he had died. It was as well not to tell that — not until after the wedding, anyhow.

"Nowadays men do not care to marry a girl of questionable stock," the doctor said in a queer, dry voice, looking beyond the drawing-room, beyond his hostess, beyond Brixton itself even, and involuntarily giving word to his predominant thought.

Mrs. Megson bridled and ruffled her net fichu and her lace-edged handkerchief.

"What nonsense!" she cried out rudely. "Harriott is a fine, strapping girl; and as to her father and his relations — what have they to do with her? Why, if everybody went on like that there would be no marriages and no children, and the world would come to

an end. There is always something! That stands to reason, since we all die, sooner or later."

He smiled a little grimly, but only said, —

"I think I will go out and find Harriott."

Mrs. Megson smiled discreetly to herself as she watched him go. Then she bustled out into the kitchen to furtively hurry the maids and waiter. She thought she had finessed beautifully; to use her own expression, she had brought the doctor to the scratch.

He had to run the gauntlet of eyes at the back windows of the neighbouring houses. There was great glee in all the nurseries and kitchens when the Megsons gave a party. Even the mistresses—those who had not been bidden—played peeping Tom over the edge of the coloured paper which was pasted in artistic imitation of stained glass across the lower half of the bath-room windows.

He could see Harriott. She was sitting on a rustic chair, looking a little flushed and greasy after tennis, and talking to another girl—the girl who lived in the next road but one, and whose name was Polly Mackay. He stood still for a moment, his face heavy and sorrowful, like the face of a man who has persuaded himself to endure. The whole scene was a little unreal to him; he was so shaken by Mrs. Megson's confidences. The scheme of his life was utterly changed. Yet he took in the minutest detail of the tennis-lawn and the people on it. There were four courts—it was a ground open to any one in the Gardens who chose to pay—and every court was full. He saw the balls and the nets and the supple figures of the girls. He saw Mr. Megson in flannels of the latest cut and pattern. He saw Mrs.

Bellamy Bristowe, sulking on a chair by herself because she considered no one good enough to talk to, and Mr. Bellamy Bristowe, who was a heavy, fair man, flirting with a good-looking little woman, whose husband was only a piano salesman — with a first-class firm, as Mrs. Megson, anxious for her social credit, always hastened to add.

He went up at last to Harriott and Polly Mackay. The latter was a plain girl, fashionable, on Brixton lines, with a few pimples on her face — the hard, red pimples which seem to show temper. She was saying through her nose, "*I call it stupid.*"

It was a favourite comment with her, and she spat it out vigorously, drawing back her lips and wrinkling her nose, like a snarling dog.

Harriott was laughing, evidently at some joke of her own. He stared at her hungrily. She looked quite pretty to-day, just as sometimes she looked rather more than plain. The limp pink blouse, with the extravagant sleeves, suited her. He watched her minutely; the constant nervous movement at the corners of her mouth, the dilation and contraction of her protuberant eyes, the restlessness of her hands, the quiver of her thin nostrils. She was a Wicken: he saw disease in her vivacity. He reflected gloomily on all that poor Mrs. Megson had let out about the family — with the best intentions in the world — drink, madness, epilepsy, dead babies.

He could not marry her now. All his plans were upset. And a wife was really necessary — two or three matrons had hinted as much. A wife and a bald head, they helped a doctor tremendously, he reflected quite gravely. The bald head he must wait for, but he had

quite believed that the wife was to be had for the asking.

He had thought uneasily sometimes, when he was away from the spell of it, that a certain charming queer-ness of Harriott's showed she was not sound all through. He insisted on soundness in a woman, just as he would have done in a peach; soundness—body, mind, and morals. He did not want whimsicality in a wife. He did not want cleverness: he thought complacently that he had enough of that himself. Harriott had the reputation of being clever; she certainly possessed the gift of making people uncomfortable. But then marriage would cure her of that: marriage brought a woman to her level.

Her intangible difference from other girls, which he had taken for witchery, was really dormant disease. *She* was healthy enough, but he did not dare to think of what her children might be. He was a very serious young man, and heredity was one of his many grave fads. He thought that men and women ought to be mated for their physical qualities just as other animals were. On no account must her children be his also. He thought that she should, by Act of Parliament, be forbidden to have children at all.

Both the girls looked up at him, Polly with nervous alacrity. She had decided long ago that he would be a very suitable husband for her. Harriott jumped up and caught his arm with an air of proprietorship.

"I know a quiet corner," she said. "Come away and talk."

CHAPTER II

IT was at the far end of the tennis-ground, between a row of limes and the red wall which shut off a new road of villas. Some one had considerably run a bench along this wall. Harriott sat down at one end and signed to him to sit close to her.

"I've got something to say," she began, with an air of much importance. "To be frank, you are not exactly the sort of person I should select to say it to. But there isn't anybody else, and I must tell somebody."

She looked so bewitching, so sound, so thoroughly desirable, that he almost wished Mrs. Megson had not been so confidential. He sat staring at her changing, animated face, with the persistent, gentle wistfulness of a dog. He was beginning dully to realise how very fond he was of her — that it was not, after all, as he had believed, altogether a matter of professional convenience, but of life-love.

She was not pretty: her features marked her unmistakably as plain. But the plain girl always has the pull over her sisters. Women like her and men trust her. There was something alluring about her queer eyes — thick, blue eyes, not at all bright — wide open, rather stupid-looking eyes sometimes — but so odd and piquant.

"It's about the fifth commandment," she said in an agitated way.

He started. He went to church himself, as a matter of policy, but the Megsons were gaily agnostic: Sunday was such a convenient day to entertain. It was odd that Harriott should know the fifth commandment from the ninth or seventh, but that was only part of her unexpected oddity.

"I don't want my days to be long in the land—if the land is to be Brixton," she said dreamily. "But has it ever occurred to you that there must be another world beyond Brixton?"

"Why, of course there is," he returned, looking at her in amazement. "There's—the world beyond—and there's Wales, and there's London: St. Thomas's Hospital, you know, and the Westminster Bridge Road, and Stamford Street, and the New Cut—though that's not a nice part."

She threw him a glance of contemptuous tolerance.

"I know. Why, we go to London sometimes, to the West-end, shopping, at sale time. But I mean a human world: different people, you understand, a different atmosphere. Have you ever noticed that the people in the omnibuses are quite different from those in the trams? Why do the people in the trams always wear seal, plush, and dirty gloves? I'm quite sure that there are women who have not a patent carpet-sweeper. At Brixton no house is complete without that."

"You are talking nonsense," he said with perfect truth.

"Of course, I never talk anything else. And I'm ready to admit that a patent broom has nothing to do with the fifth commandment," she returned gaily. "Now do make me serious, or there won't be time,

and I want your advice so badly. I've been very miserable about it. I have not been able to sleep at night."

Her expression suddenly changed, and she looked absolutely woful; with unexpected lines about her mouth and a weary falling of her eyelids, which certainly looked like want of sleep.

"I'm in love," she broke out, half laughing and half crying with the intensity of her emotion at the confession. "He is a Londoner — no taint of these horrible over-the-water suburbs. I wonder if the Thames malignantly shuts us off from — Now that is nonsense again and you made no attempt to stop me. He has never been to Brixton. This life of ours is an absolute blank to him" — she made the admission slowly, with much emphasis. "Just think what that must mean! He never talks of trams — 'It's only three-ha-pence to the "Dodo," and they'll take you all the way from the "yard" to the "Mother Bunch" for a penny.' How tired one gets of it! I met him in a — well, in a 'bus. I suppose it is a very dreadful thing, and I have been meeting him ever since, and he wants to marry me."

She leaned back against the wall, setting her head against the bricks with an air of defiance and setting her irregular teeth too. She looked at her doctor and smiled rather feebly: his expression was not encouraging. It was very seldom she smiled, because she was conscious that she showed her gums, and that a woman's gums are the very ugliest part of her. But this time her anxiety got the better of her.

He did not speak. He was quite overcome by the

intricacies of the situation: it was like one of those maddening, abstruse puzzles in which some people delight. He was quite sure that it was all plain sailing, but there were so many complications. There was so much to condemn and to compassionate. He was sorry for Harriott, more sorry for the young man, and most sorry for himself. And yet he congratulated himself, and it was difficult to grasp the fact that Mrs. Megson's admission, which had seemed such a supreme matter ten minutes before, did not really matter at all. Harriott would have refused him. But he thought he ought to tell that ugly story to her lover, the new young man — for whom he had so swiftly developed such a smouldering pity and hatred.

"Who is he?" he asked at last.

His voice was a little shaky, but his grave expression was a very good imitation of an elder brother's.

"He's Dandie," she admitted, with a comical laugh and an unusually thick, dim look in her queer eyes. "Daniel Darnell in reality, but I always call him Dandie. And he's fair, and dresses beautifully, and does not care how much money he spends." She went on ticking off these qualities on her shaking fingers as if they were cardinal virtues. "He takes a hansom just to the end of the street and pays eighteenpence without a murmur. I cannot think what took him into a 'bus that day. Fate, no doubt."

She set her head more firmly against the wall and looked at him quizzically. She was twitching nervously all over, the hands, which she suddenly clasped tightly, on her serge skirt; her loose-lipped, weak mouth; her pointed, thinly cut nose.

"And he's a gentleman," she went on — "every inch a gentleman, as poor mother would say. And — and — it's about mother that I wish to speak to you. If Dandie meets her I am done. So much depends on environment, doesn't it? At present I am just a little mysterious to him — you understand? But if he saw me here, with her, he would be disgusted at the vulgarity of the thing. A father does not matter — he is only the Whiteley of the establishment — the universal provider. But my mother!"

She threw up her quivering hands with a tragic gesture of utter hopelessness, and then clenched them as suddenly again.

The doctor stared. This sort of thing was quite new to him. "Your mother — Mrs. Megson — is a very well-preserved woman," he said feebly.

"Horribly so. Those false teeth of hers, they draw her lips into a perpetual, cruel smile, they remind me of the keyboard of a new piano. That hair! That fringe! Well-preserved fifty is so much worse than a frank admission. A wise woman should always dress a little older than she is."

The doctor only sat and stared at her, with his gentle, questioning glance. There was nothing for him to say. This morbid feeling of hers about the woman she believed to be her mother seemed to him so puerile considering the tragedy that lay behind. He was beginning to feel even more sorry for Harriott than he was for himself.

She spoke again — passionately, and with a long-drawn sigh coming before the words.

"You do not understand. Remember, she is *my*

mother. Sometimes I feel that I cannot bear the strain. Last night I worked myself up into such a state of fear and misery and remorse that I made up my mind to jump out of the window and end the thing. It was so comical"—she began to laugh in a quivering, cackling fashion—"I actually threw the sash up, but when I saw that I should only fall on the tricycle-house and get a black eye I went back to bed again."

"I believe you are simply having a joke with me," he said reproachfully.

"A joke!" the tragedy slipped over her eyes again. "That just shows how little you know of me. I should laugh when they were putting the rope round my neck, and suffer tortures of anticipation all the time. If she had ever been kind it would break my heart to feel as I do, and not be able to help it. If she had ever been unkind, it would be almost as bad. There is something about downright brutality that I could not resist. It would be noble to endure everything—even the loss of Dandie—for the sake of a wicked woman. I'd love to glow with a sense of sacrifice. But she has been just a 'good' mother. No man can understand the sort of thing—plenty to eat and to wear, not a grain of sympathy. There is a wall between us; her very voice irritates me. Isn't it strange?"

"Not at all," he said unguardedly, thinking that she was evidently a Wicken through and through, with nothing of her mother, Mrs. Megson's sister Rosalie, in her.

She turned on him furiously.

"I wish I had not told you; I wish you had never seen her. I always thought that meek, inscrutable look

of yours veiled contempt. You've been quizzing her. You have noticed her hopeless vulgarity all the time! That is all *you* can see, but she is *my mother*, and I am ashamed of her. Sometimes I am in an agony of affection. I make an advance and she repels me—quite unconsciously, poor thing. At another time she drives me into a frenzy of disgust and impatience. She must suffer as much as I do."

"Don't be so tragic," he said with indescribable tenderness, the subdued tenderness with which we speak of a dead person. Harriott was dead to him. "She does not feel anything at all. You are out of sorts. You want a tonic."

"Of course she doesn't; she never felt anything in her life," Harriott returned with an air of immense relief, and then lapsed into silence, neglecting the professional touch in his speech.

They could see the tennis-ground and the people, through the dry leaves of the limes. Mr. Megson was playing atrociously, as he always did, and marshalling everybody in a very commanding way. He was a bombastic little man—the sort of man who calls out for the guard on the slightest pretext when on a railway journey, and who zealously hands women out of tram-cars and gets taken for a pickpocket for his pains. He had mutton-chop whiskers too—which are always aggressive. They could see Mrs. Megson on a bench talking painfully to Mrs. Bellamy Bristowe, who never turned her head or relaxed the downward curve of her silly mouth. They saw Mr. Bellamy Bristowe with the piano man's wife, and Polly Mackay strolling up and down with the stockbroker.

"Polly's a little soured," Harriott said lightly, with a return to her normal manner. "The last time we gave a party she wore a Greek costume. It was lovely; I never thoroughly hated Polly before. And her hair was tied with bands of narrow ribbon. That gown of Polly's was an inspiration; I suppose we all have moments like that. A man fell in love with her—a middle-aged and most eligible man. He danced with her more frequently than was decent, and when he didn't dance, he sat out—which was worse. He was in a Government office. I always think that sounds so beautifully cold and dignified: you can't imagine one of them living at Brixton, although I know hosts do. He did not, so he slept at our house. And next morning he was out before seven, walking up and down our ridiculous little garden and craning his neck for a view of Polly. You can see the Mackays' back garden, if you try very hard. But he was the very first person who ever thought it worth while. She never came out, but about ten she ran in to us in her old mackintosh which she always wears in the morning for shopping. Her hair was rough, and her pimples worse than usual. You should have seen his face when he shook hands with her. I have never lived a more dramatic moment. And poor Polly turned purple and pale green. She knew, of course—a woman is so sharp."

"Well?" he asked, as she closed her lips.

Harriott laughed. She had a rather cold-blooded and satirical laugh, because she always, remembering her gums, kept her mouth shut.

"Isn't that like a man?" she said. "You always ask for the winding-up chapter, the chapter that ruins

a thing. There isn't any 'well.' He married another woman two months after. While we are on poor Polly, I may as well say what has been on my mind for weeks—that she would make an ideal wife for you."

CHAPTER III

A FEW days after the party the Megsons went to Margate for six weeks. They went to Margate every year, and when they were twitted with the vulgarity of the thing by advanced Brixtonians Mr. Megson would open his eyes and say bombastically, "Think of the air — most salubrious. We go for the air." But Mrs. Megson was bewildered at the very idea of any one objecting to Margate. She had spent her summer holiday there every year since she was a girl. She had met Mr. Megson there — on the beach, in easy sandshoes.

Owen stayed in Brixton, which was almost empty. He went about in a plodding, mechanical way, and sometimes he asked himself stupidly why the savour had gone out of life, and then remembered that he had lost Harriott — not because of her lover, but because of her constitution. When the Megsons returned he refused more than one invitation. But one day Mrs. Megson sent for him professionally.

It seemed to him many years since he had been in the comfortable, ugly house. He was shown into the drawing-room, which had resumed its normal severe aspect. The blinds were drawn half-mast high; the artificial evergreen begonias wanted dusting, and the tea-table with the ledges which had held cakes on the afternoon when Mrs. Megson told him the family history was now given over to gorgeously bound books, full

of indifferent illustrations. It was just like all the other Brixton drawing-rooms in which he was accustomed to wait, but everything attained an individuality in his eyes—the enamelled milking-stools, the bulrushes spread out like gross brown fingers at the back of the piano, the big jars of coarse Kaga ware on the shelves of the overmantel. He had lived tragedy in that room. Doubtless there were other girls in Brixton, but in all the world there was but one Harriott. It was only after he lost her that he found it out.

The tropical palms hired from the florist for the party had been taken back, and the conservatory, which, owing to the exigencies of villa-building, faced due north, was dolefully tidy, as usual. The one bit of colour in it was the oil-stove, whose front was of ruby glass. This oil-stove was heroically trying to force fronds on a hare's-foot fern—all foot—and to keep the leaves of a geranium from turning yellow—there was no question of bloom. It was smelling abominably in the effort, but its intention was beyond criticism.

The tennis-ground was deserted, the grass looked pinched and the slack nets forlorn. The limes under which he had sat with Harriott shed now and then a dry leaf. The tricycle-house had been newly painted.

He had plenty of time for thought, because Mrs. Megson, who was on her dignity, kept him waiting. He could hear her heavy tread in the room above, from the washstand to the duchesse dressing-table. He knew the arrangement of that room well. Mr. Megson had a liver trouble and took to his bed occasionally, especially when the outlook in the City was gloomy.

After all it was Harriott who came in first. She had

on her hat and coat; wore a velveteen blouse several shades darker than her eyes, and a rather vulgarly elaborated lace collar. Something had been lifted from her. She seemed brisk—and happy. She hurried across the room to him, sweeping down one of the bound books in her impetuous passage. She seized both his hands and squeezed them roughly.

"Why haven't you been before?" she asked. "I have been wanting a chat; you take the place of a girlfriend. There are no girls in Brixton—only sniggering, slangy dummies. And I have been through a crisis. Do you remember how ridiculously I talked? I might have spared myself all that emotion."

"That is the way with nervous people," he said wisely. "They wear themselves out over insignificant things, and then when a real trouble comes—"

"Ah!" she threw back her head and let her arms fall with an air of permanent lassitude, "but there will never be any real trouble in my case. You see, I am going to marry Dandie—dear Dandie!—in November—next month, you understand. And he has a thousand a year."

She said it quite innocently, with a pitiful unconsciousness of mercenary motive; she really believed that money, with Dandie thrown in, was the one thing needful.

"And Mrs. Megson?" asked Owen, with his thoughtful scowl.

"Aunt Megson," Harriott said significantly, and he gave a startled jump in the upholstered wicker chair which made it creak.

"Only my aunt!" the girl went on, nodding at him

impressively. "I'm getting quite fond of her; when I believed she was my mother I hated her and loved her in such a miserable fierce way. Still, I feel that I've been cheated of a novel sensation. I shall never find out now whether a girl can really feel towards her mother as I felt. It was only a spurious remorse. How do you feel towards your mother, for example?"

"She died when I was three years old."

Harriott laughed. She seemed bubbling with spirit, and more full of moods and oddities than ever.

"Just like you, to fail one at the critical moment. I wonder if you always would?" Her expression changed, which seemed to hint that she was about to prance off to a new subject.

Owen, who never attempted to follow all her windings, said stolidly: "She died of consumption. I shall not be really safe until I'm forty."

Harriott shuddered and slightly slipped back from him, as if he had held up a death's-head to her eyes. Then, her face lifting, she said dreamily:—

"Only my aunt! Such changes since I saw you last! And Dandie! I might have known that Dandie would be nice."

"Nice?" said Owen, in a dazed way, coming back abruptly from his mother's fate to his own fortunes. He felt as if she had turned a strong blaze of light on him. These half-revelations were more than he could endure. How much had Mrs. Megson told her niece? Why had she broken the silence of a lifetime and told her at all? How much did Daniel Darnell know?

"Yes—nice. It means a lot to a woman. It's so

subtle. I'm very fond of you, but I shouldn't call you exactly nice," she said frankly.

She looked at his bright tie and limp collar; at his finger-nails, which always looked as if they had been laboriously scraped. Cleanliness with him was a virtue and not an indulgence.

"I was afraid of Dandie," she continued. "He always talks about the correct thing; he has never forgiven himself for speaking to me without an introduction. The correct thing! Aunt Megson is the most incorrect thing alive from his point of view. We were at Oxford Circus. So was Dandie, just as we happened to be waiting to cross. When the policeman put up his hand—you know how omnipotent the policeman at the Circus is—we all made a dive and jostled together, and then—then when we got to the curb I had to introduce them. I only mumbled 'Mrs. Megson'; I felt a worm for doing it. But it was as well, for as we went in the omnibus to Victoria she told me that I was only her sister's child, and not hers. Poor thing! Isn't that just like her want of tact? Fancy selecting an omnibus as a place in which to tell a most romantic story. My head kept knocking against hers, for I was in an agony of interest and determined not to miss a word."

"And you are sure you did not miss a word?" asked Owen, with emphasis.

"Of course I didn't. My mother married above her station—that's encouraging, isn't it? I admire her good taste, for it is exactly what I am going to do myself. She died when I was born, and my father, who died soon after, belonged to a county family. What does that mean exactly? I only know Brixton and

Margate, remember. Oh, don't trouble to define it. I really care very little about my father — he's too shadowy. But I do care about the story."

"And that is all she told you?"

"What an appetite for romance you have! That is all. She told Dandie exactly the same story when he came down. He has been to supper and to spend Sunday." She made a little wry mouth. "And — and — everything is going on swimmingly. You must meet him."

"Yes, I must meet him," said Owen, the scowl gathering again.

"Well, I am going to meet him now." Harriott rose and giggled lightly. "We are to dine out."

She stood on her toes and turned her head over her shoulder so that she might get as comprehensive a view as possible in the bevelled glass of the overmantel. With her bright hat, her radiant face and fuzzy hair, she seemed like a little, gaudily feathered bird. But suddenly she dropped flat on her heels and looked at Owen. He was used by long ardent habit to note every change in her face, and he saw that it was flecked by a black shadow. She looked happy still, wickedly, heartlessly happy, but there were scalding, disfiguring tears in her eyes. They made her lids a raw pink. It was a strange expression — a blending of mischief, relief, and remorse.

"What is the good of making any bones about it?" she said softly — an incongruous softness, for such a brusque, boyish query.

"I'm downright sorry for you. I'm fond of you, too, in a wrong way. There are lots of other girls; there is

Polly Mackay. I never could have married you. You will soon forget me. Love is a mere habit."

She said it calmly, with perfect confidence and a purring, maternal sort of compassion for him. He started, and then flushed with shame and annoyance. What sibyls women were! She had guessed. She had made up her mind in all probability long before he had been conscious of having made up his.

She put her hand out, evidently thinking he was going to speak. "Don't deny it. That would be petty — not like you. I thought it over a long time," she went on, with the odd mixture of flippant selfishness and intense sympathy which was so characteristic of her; "and — and it won't do. You must be content to let me go. One always loses one's first — though it would kill me to lose Dandie. You see he stands for Freedom: he is opening the gates of a new world. We are to live in the very middle of London. I never mean to cross the Thames below Richmond again."

She was an object for intense compassion, in her airy, unquestioning happiness. Owen looked at her pitifully. His patient, rather mystic eyes — so out of place in his heavy Welsh face — seemed straining to see her future. If she married would each year bring horror or would she be dealt with leniently? Perhaps she would be let off; permitted to be the last. That was the merciful way with Nature. Perhaps she would only have to swallow the diluted bitterness of a childless woman.

She looked strong and clean. But he was too young in his profession, too ardent on this particular theory of race-purity, to be turned aside by a finely moulded neck and firm arms.

Her happiness was so absolute that it seemed almost to take form and enshrine her. He had not the heart to undeceive her. He dared not tell her the honest truth—that he loved her more than his own soul, but would not have married her for a dozen kingdoms. He could not tell her, but it was his clear duty to hint the state of things to Daniel Darnell. Heredity was a national matter. He thought it little short of a national disgrace that we should have pedigree dogs, pedigree guinea-pigs even, and no pedigree men and women. Why, with care, we might become a nation of giants. The improvement of the race was vital: it concerned every one. It was a magnificent idea. It was more revolutionary than a dozen democratic leaflets.

“We will never speak of it again,” she said, dismissing the matter by an eloquent gesture. “We shall not see much more of each other. I’m to be married in six weeks, and, once I’m married, I shall shun Brixton as I would the plague. And I am so strong that I never need a doctor; I shall never call you in: I’m what you would call a cart-horse kind of woman—plenty of bone and muscle, and very little elegance. Plain, but well made, as they say about kitchen furniture.”

She squared her big shoulders and looked at her deep chest admiringly.

“It’s nice to be healthy—not to have things in the family, isn’t it?” she asked, with satisfaction. “There’s Uncle Megson; he rather boasts that he has everything in his blood but insanity. You wouldn’t think there was room enough for all of it in one small man. As for Aunt—doesn’t it strike you as pitiful that I have so soon got out of the way of calling her mother?—there

is nothing in the world the matter with her. To-day is Tuesday, and on Sunday we always over-eat. It is the Megson religion; it is as good as any other. I used to think that if I had a great trouble I should make a study of religions. But that is out of the question now I am going to marry Dandie. A thousand a year must go a tremendous way, don't you think? I shall never mend my gloves or think twice before I buy a new hat. I shall read all the books that come out and go to every new play. And I shall educate Dandie up to hot bread. Aunt never lets me have it: she says new bread is so extravagant. She goes to the kitchen and snouts into the bread-pan every morning. I shall not do that: a thousand a year is above the bread-pan."

Mrs. Megson was deliberately clumping down the stairs; they heard her administer a little lecture to the housemaid on the half-landing because the stair-rod did not gleam enough.

"I'll be off before she comes in." Harriott went towards the conservatory.

She gave Owen her hand and looked up at his broad face, with the gentle eyes behind gold glasses, affectionately.

"Remember what I said about Polly Mackay. Only when you've got her, keep a tight hand. She's sly. Never trust a modest girl."

She whisked by the hare's-foot, the geranium, and the ruby-fronted oil-stove, and he heard her run out of the garden by the back way as the handle of the drawing-room door was turned. Mrs. Megson had put on her afternoon black surah, with the big jet buttons and the canary velvet bow tied at the back of her short neck.

She was laced so tightly that her full bust pouched out beneath her chin like an exaggerated goitre. The end of her pointed nose was reddish, and the whites of her eyes a bilious yellow. She appeared full of importance and yet a little abashed. She answered Owen's inquiries concerning her health rather snappishly, and professed strong contempt for exercise and a restricted diet in place of drugs. She was offended because the doctor had kept away from Gammeridge Gardens; he had refused two invitations to supper. But she broke out with her good news, in spite of her violent attempt at reserve and dignity. Dignity always took the form of sulks with her.

"I suppose you have heard about Harriott's slice of luck," she said at last. "No doubt the Mackays have told you."

"Harriott has just told me herself that she is going to be married," he said simply.

"Yes, to a Mr. Darnell. He has a large private income. By-and-by when affairs look up in South America he will have very much more money than he has now." She gave an awkward laugh, because Owen's expression remained so impassive and heavy. "He rides in the Row and has his own man-servant. He has given Harriott a beautiful engagement ring. Mr. Megson says it cost fifty pounds if a penny."

She stopped to blow her nose with her usual emphasis, looking at Owen furtively over the border of the handkerchief. She was sorry for him.

"I used to think," she added nervously, "that you and Harriott would make a match of it. Mr. Megson and I would not have stood in your way. But of

course it is much better that she should marry a gentleman like Mr. Darnell, isn't it? I am sure you must see that."

"Much better — if she marries at all," he said meaningly, after a pause.

"And why shouldn't she marry?" demanded Mrs. Megson, speedily on the aggressive. "A fine, healthy girl, and not bad-looking either. It would be very odd if she did not."

"There is her family history."

"Nonsense! As if every man wanted to trace his wife back to the time of Adam," cried Mrs. Megson, with a boisterous snigger at her own witticism. "Besides, I have told him that Harriott on the father's side has not a very good constitution, just as I told you, and he thought nothing of it. Why, his own father died of jaundice. I did not tell him about the uncle in the lunatic asylum," she went on, forgetting that she had not told Owen this either. "People can't help these things in families, but it is as well not to talk about them. And I've told Harriott that I am only her aunt. I told her in the omnibus, after she had introduced me to Mr. Darnell. I thought it time to tell her."

"And he doesn't mind?" said the doctor, ponderingly.

"Mind! Why should he? They are to be married almost at once — the first week in November. Mr. Megson is rather disappointed. He wanted it to be late in the spring, so that we could have a garden party. You know what a sociable man Mr. Megson is; he was talking about you only last night. It is so long since we have seen you. Now, do stay to supper. Harriott and Mr. Darnell will be in about ten; he is

taking her to dine in the West somewhere, one of these swell restaurants—the Rugby. Mr. Megson says you can't get a dinner there for less than half a sovereign, to say nothing of wine. It seems wicked to put so much money down your throat; but, there, he can afford it, and it is good for trade."

Owen stayed. He wanted to see Daniel Darnell, and he wanted to see as much of Harriott as he could while he was able. They came in about ten. Harriott was flushed with good fare and wine. The hand she gave him was hot and dry like a coal, and her queer, blurred eyes were actually shining. She went up and kissed her aunt, and then her uncle. Owen had never seen her so affectionate before. They had all three slipped into the new habit with ease. What seemed so strange and sudden to him they accepted as a matter of course. There was an air of good temper and intense relief about them all. Mrs. Megson was plainly proud of her niece's conquest, and Mr. Megson, who had always appeared as a rather indifferent father, made an excellent uncle.

Owen found himself being introduced, with much ceremony, to an irreproachably dressed young man, whose handsome face was a little foolish, and whose girlish red mouth was half masked by a slight golden mustache; a young man who looked at him and spoke to him with careless insolence. Dandie was the son of a rich man, and had never done a stroke of work in his life. He had a gentle contempt, which he did not try to conceal, for those "poor devils" whose governors had failed to provide for them. As for the Megsons, it was plain that he was only temporarily enduring

them as a means to Harriott. His polite sneers made Owen long to kick him. He was sick and sore and savage; he sat there chafing, staring at Harriott, and listening to the simple Megsons as they cringed to this rich simpleton.

Mrs. Megson hung on his very gestures, and Mr. Megson brought out his best box of cigars, saying that he had bought them from a friend in the wholesale tobacco line and that they had stood him in a pretty penny.

"Though I daresay you'll get better at your club," he said deprecatingly as Dandie took one.

Harriott was unusually quiet. Now and then, when her uncle came out with a particularly blatant piece of vulgarity, she looked across the room at Owen with a suppliant air. On these occasions the devoted Welshman would break into an awkward silence with some inapt remark. She sat very near her lover, and kept looking at him in a wondering, adoring way. She was evidently impressed by his little acts of good breeding. Brixton young men when they come home from the City do not waste themselves by politeness to their women-folk. He got up to ceremoniously open the door for Mrs. Megson when she bustled out to order coffee; to tell the maids, no doubt, to make it a little stronger than usual, because the rich young gentleman who was going to marry Miss Harriott had been used all his life to the very best of everything. She was embarrassed by this attention, and when he asked her if she permitted smoking, Mr. Megson answered for her, calling out in boisterous style:—

"Smoke where you like in this house, my dear fellow. By Jove, I'm master in my own house. Take

care that you are. Who pays the piper calls the tune, eh, Amy? Though to be sure Harriott has thirty-five pounds a year of her own, while I married my wife without a penny."

Soon after eleven Owen and Dandie left together. The doctor's house was only a stone's-throw from the cabstand. Mrs. Megson gave her doughy hand first to Harriott's betrothed and then to Owen. She gave the latter a glance which was half appealing and half threatening. But his face was gently inscrutable. Then she called him back, on the pretence that she had forgotten some instructions he had given her as to diet. When they were alone for a moment in the drawing-room, she said excitedly, under her breath:—

"I shall think it very mean and ungentlemanly if you try to set Mr. Darnell against Harriott. Such a relief to get her off our hands! For husbands can be very nasty over their wife's relations. We've always done our best to be kind to you, Dr. Owen. I'm sure you've been to all our entertainments. There are plenty of other girls, and one woman is pretty much like any other woman by the time you have been married five years. I was in and out of love a dozen times. You ought to marry; it would double your practice. Mrs. Norris at the other end of the Gardens was saying so to me only the other day; you know what a young family she has, and people are a trifle shy of an unmarried medical man."

Before he could answer Harriott put her head in at the door.

"You are keeping Dandie waiting," she said reproachfully.

So Owen went out into the hall, leaving Mrs. Megson standing in a flurried attitude by the piano. She was wishing most devoutly that she had not let her tongue run away with her on the afternoon of the party. She always said too much: Mr. Megson was continually bullying her for it. But who would have believed that Dr. Owen was such a fool?

"If he breaks it off I'll ruin his practice," she said viciously to herself, while the other four were saying farewell in the brightly lighted hall.

Harriott hung devotedly about Dandie, even stroking the velvet collar of his coat, as though the very feel of his clothes was luxury. She ran out bare-headed to the gate as the two men walked away from the house. It was a damp night, with a fine fog which shed itself like microscopic pearls. She stood wrapped from her dull hair to her steel-capped slippers in an exquisite veil of grey. She reminded Owen vaguely of the folk-lore stories that he had been told by his old Welsh nurse when he was a child. There was a stunned, dull feeling in his head. It was his duty to ruin her life. She hated Brixton, though why she hated it he had never been able to make out. He considered it a most desirable place.

He might doom her to Brixton for the rest of her life. He was prepared to knock down her castle of a thousand a year. A fairy castle with handsome, foolish Dandie as the complaisant man in possession. He meant it kindly; he loved her. Suppose she had children? He thought enthusiastically of his ideal world, full of pure-bred people.

He had been filling up his glass abstractedly all the

evening, Mr. and Mrs. Megson were commenting on it at that very moment and debating on the policy of a gentle hint. So many drinks of whiskey had made him more enthusiastic on an ideal and more dogged about what he called his duty than he would have been in daylight after a cup of coffee. The mysterious grey fog, his strong emotions, and the whiskey had affected him oddly.

He and Dandie went down Gammeridge Gardens. There were lights in most of the bedroom windows, and from one ground floor came the plodding thump of a piano.

Dandie flipped away the end of Mr. Megson's best cigar disdainfully.

"Don't you smoke?" he said indifferently to Owen, who was striding along, with his head bent, his forehead furrowed, and his thick lips stuck out.

"Only a pipe."

"A pipe! I suppose so," returned Dandie, with enigmatical politeness.

He gave Owen a contemptuous glance. He considered him a smug. At the university there had been smugs. A smug was a fellow who didn't tub enough, whose linen was dubious, who studied hard and was indifferent to athletics. A smug was something more than that, too: he was difficult to define. But if you'd met one you could be certain of the others.

The Welshman, quite unconscious that he was being classified, stopped at his own gate. He lived in a double-fronted house of red brick and white stone. An almost perpendicular flight of steps led up to the front door, which was grained to imitate walnut and had pan-

els of stained glass. A red lamp hung above it and cast a ruddy circle on the pavement. Dandie looked the house up and down superciliously, from the long white curtains in the basement to the short white curtains on the bedroom floor. He looked at the big, blazing brass-plate on the door, and then he looked at Owen with a languid, scornful intolerance as he put out his hand.

"Good night," he said. "The cabstand is just round the corner, is it not?"

"Yes. But you have plenty of time. Come in and have a glass of whiskey."

Owen's voice was thick and he looked at the other man appealingly.

"No, thanks. I must get back to town."

"Then I'll walk with you to the cabstand." He gripped his big hand heavily round the railing as he swung off his own doorstep to the pavement.

"I wanted a word with you about Harriott," he stammered, as he kept up with Dandie's impatient strides; "you are marrying rather in a hurry. Now, if I married, I should weigh it well. I'm fond of Harriott," — his voice was growing thicker, — "but I wouldn't marry her. She's not sound; her family history is bad. Haven't they told you?"

Dandie's expression became dangerous. The glances that had been signalled from Harriott to the doctor and back again had not missed his observation. He threw a keen, quick look at Owen. The angry look in his eyes died down and gave place to contempt again. The man's thick lips were loose, his eyes almost idiotic in their intense anxiety and pleading. Dandie would have

knocked him down, but he was not worth it; he was half drunk.

"Health is everything," Owen went on. "A sound mind in a sound body, you know."

He was a crank on this matter of pure stock. It was the one weak touch in a remorselessly pushing young man. He laughed nervously. He was not himself. It was an awkward topic; he was collected enough to realise that his attitude was unwarranted and impertinent. The mist, shrouding the shrubs in the front gardens, and hanging over the wet slate roofs of the houses, made Brixton seem a place over which some weird, sudden spell had been cast. A tram-car shooting smoothly along on the gleaming lines was a vehicle of wizard build; the very jingle of its bells uncanny. He could still see Harriott standing at the Megsons' elaborate cast-iron gate, the mist wrapping her bare head and hanging in front of her nervous, tender face, with two queer, rather stupid blue eyes. Standing thus, she had appealed to the romance in him, the romance which is dormant in every Welshman.

Dandie hailed a cab. He was in a hurry to get away from this fellow, who was a crank as well as a smug. They were an odd lot at Brixton. The cab drew up to the curb. He got in. Before he drove off he put his fair head, crowned with the glossy tall hat, out of the window and gave a last look and a last sneer. Owen was standing shabby and loose on the pavement, with his strong, rough-looking hands in his pockets and his chin sunk forward on his generous red tie. His face was heavy.

"You don't suppose that I'd choose a wife as I would

a horse—for her points,” Dandie said unpleasantly. “Piccadilly, cabby.”

Owen was alone on the pavement. After a moment he gave himself a shake and walked off briskly, turning the corner of the street and pulling up with an automatic jerk at his own house. He climbed laboriously up the perpendicular flight of doorsteps, leaving the ugly mark of his substantial boots in irregular trail behind him. He let himself in with his latchkey and almost reeled into the dining-room, which was on the left-hand side of the hall. His housekeeper had made up the fire and gone to bed. He pulled off his muddy boots, found his slippers, and stared round at the familiar furniture. For the first time he looked at it without a feeling of proud satisfaction and perfect content. He had always considered himself a lucky young man—much to be envied. He had a practice of his own in a most select suburb; he had a beautifully furnished house and a capital housekeeper. And he wasn't thirty. He threw himself inertly back in an easy-chair and watched the fire die out. There was an occasional muffled tinkle of tram-bells outside; and inside the frequent fall of a cinder from between the bright bars to the tessellated hearth.

He had done all he could, and a great deal more than he had a strict right to do. His head was aching. It felt twice its usual size, as it had felt once in his hospital days, after a bachelor party. That bachelor party, with two visits to music halls, made up his crop of wild oats. Mr. Megson's whiskey was as bad as his cigars. Let Harriott marry. She must take her chance. As for his ideal, it was not for one man to revolutionise

human nature. She must take her chance; thousands did. He saw the result in his daily practice. Mrs. Megson might have exaggerated. He clung to that theory and recalled a dozen instances in which she had grossly exaggerated.

The fire was out; the black cinders made little crackling, ticking noises, as the life went out of them. He felt that his world had died out with the fire. Everything was dead and cold. He went heavily up to his bed.

CHAPTER IV

THE wedding-day was raw and dry; the high fog which had shrouded Brixton for so long that autumn hung in the sky.

The weeks that came between his useless warning to Dandie and the marriage had been very busy ones with Owen. People had autumn colds and called them influenza. Polly Mackay had one. It necessitated daily fires in the drawing-room and the prettiest loose gown that Brixton could supply. She used to look at him with an expression of steady, rather vicious resolve when he refused to stay to tea, pleading overwork. She would call out, in her shrill, nasal voice—the voice of an incipient “nagger”:—

“What’s the good of working yourself to death? I call it stupid of people to keep you always on the trot.”

She was pathetically anxious to secure him. Sometimes when he had gone she relieved her feelings by crying savagely. She was soured. Her big brother made brutal remarks, neighbours were satirical about the eligible Government clerk who had once been won by a Grecian gown and lost by a mackintosh.

Owen heard of Harriott through her. The Megsons were giving themselves such airs; what little good looks Harriott had ever boasted were gone; Dandie had been shamelessly trapped and would live to rue it; the elaborate preparations for the wedding were positively ridicu-

lous. Harriott he never saw from the night she stood wrapped in mist at the gate to the afternoon when she stood, unseeing and unheeding, in her travelling gown as Dandie's wife.

He was not asked to the ceremony, but he received a very big card, all gilt and flourishes, for the reception. When, after a sharp tussle with himself, he arrived at the house late, he saw that a strip of red cloth had been stretched from the doorstep to the curb. It was a ridiculously short distance: the bride could have jumped it. But Mrs. Megson always rose to the occasion when there was an entertainment. The confectioner had supplied rout seats as well as the wedding-cake; the presents were spread out for inspection.

It was Harriott's wedding-day: the plain woman's opportunity. She achieved what a more pretty bride never could have done—positive, if transient, beauty. Owen did not get near her: she was on the point of departure when he arrived, and there were so many people in the rooms. It was just like one of the Megsons' ordinary crushes, with an undercurrent of deeper feeling. He was only conscious of a pale, transfigured face, in which strange eyes were glowing; of a shaking bare hand, on which Dandie's rings shone hard and yellow. She seemed to see no one but Dandie. She walked mechanically through her part like a super at a theatre.

As for Dandie, he was more stiff and immaculately dressed than ever on this final day. He was always just a shade too immaculate: pronounced folds down the legs of his trousers, and a silk hat that was a reproof to every other one it met. He seemed quite rudely anxious to get away: to wipe Brixton from him,

as he could have done a mud stain unavoidably incurred. Harriott was absolutely spiritual: all she did was to look at her bridegroom with the eyes of a devotee. When the time came to go the guests all crowded into the hall to speed the pair. A cold wind blew in at the open door; the windows across the way were patched with curious faces; the favours on the coachman's whip and on the horses' heads looked chilly, and the threatening fog stooped nearer.

Owen took a desperate step forward as Harriott passed the hat-stand and set her feet on the door-mat. He was wishing ardently for just one final look. But she seemed to have forgotten his very existence. She stood still docilely while all the women pecked at her white face, and when it was over she flitted across the strip of red cloth and got into the carriage. Dandie followed hastily, leaving a bad impression behind him.

Everybody threw rice, and a chorus of jolly laughter ran down the thickening street. Polly Mackay had an old shoe; she rushed into the road and flung it with force. They all sniggered as it lighted on the roof of the carriage. Dandie and Harriott would be branded as a newly married pair all the way to the station. Then they hustled back into the warm house. Mrs. Megson banged the door and looked at Owen gratefully.

The pall of depression and emptiness which a bride or a corpse leaves behind dropped down on the company. One by one the guests got up to go. The festivities of the day had not really begun: there was to be a dance in the evening. Some of the women who came from a distance had brought their evening gowns, but most of them lived in neighbouring roads and were going home

to rest and dress. As Owen was leaving Mrs. Megson said with clumsy raillery :—

“And now it is your turn to get a wife.” She lowered her voice as she added : “A young unmarried man can never work up a good family practice. We shall see you at the dance, of course. There are a lot of nice girls — pretty and domesticated.”

“I’m afraid not. I’m very busy.”

“But you must come,” Polly Mackay called out, who had overheard. “I’m relying on you to walk home with me. For none of my people will be here, dear Mrs. Megson.”

“Very well; I’ll come.”

He was quite in their hands: they might do exactly as they chose with him now. Nothing mattered.

It was what Mr. Megson called a jolly dance. It was a great relief to be rid of Harriott, with her unpleasant habit of sneering at everything and everybody. Mrs. Megson was more radiant and fussy than ever. She walked a quadrille with her next-door neighbour, who was a man of position—a wool merchant and a militia captain.

Owen did not dance, but Polly made him blunder through the Lancers, saying truly that he knew them as well as anybody else. It was all shouting and stamping. Mr. Megson insisted on the most boisterous figures. He danced with spirit, clipping the piano man’s pretty wife round the waist until he nearly swung her off her feet. Mrs. Megson, from her seat against the wall, smiled approval. She was proud of his gallantries, it threw an aroma of youth and coquetry about *her*. The stockbroker three doors down, the young man who had mildly admired Harriott, was the

only one of the company who danced with precision. Everybody sneered at him. He was a pinchbeck edition of Dandie.

At supper they popped corks recklessly, and Mr. Megson kept rising to propose grandiloquent toasts. The little man was very red and effusive in his relief at getting his wife's niece off his hands. His high spirits were too large for him.

The waiter filled glasses and carried plates with an air of reproof. He was hardened to society and loftily surveyed the guests who had red faces and glib tongues.

It was nearly three when Owen stepped out into the cool street with Polly close to his side. The mist had gone and the moon was up. The moon, which is so gentle to women, made Polly appear soft and attractive. She had the hood of her long cloak over her head, and was holding the pink bow under her chin with one hand and hitching her long skirt round her ankles with the other.

"Let's go for a turn," she said, pulling up abruptly at the end of her own street, and looking at him appealingly.

The expression of her sallow face was affectionate, and seemed to ask humbly for tolerance. She looked as Owen sometimes did himself, although he was never conscious of it. He warmed towards her, as like always does to like. And he was very sore and very susceptible that night.

"But you will take cold."

"No, I shan't. This cloak is lined with fur. See! Feel!"

She threw the fronts back, showing her angular body

cased in plum-coloured velveteen, and trimmed with cheap plum-coloured satin of the wrong shade. It was a hopelessly vulgar dress, but Owen had been thinking all the evening that he had never seen Polly look better than in plum.

She took his hand and ran it along the inside of her wrap, which was warm from contact with her body. He made no further objection, but let her lead him on past the silent, sleeping houses. They had the world to themselves. They went slowly up and down past the monotonous houses: all alike, only an added storey or two and a bigger plot of front garden to mark the difference between a rental of £25 and a rental of £80. Occasionally they climbed a gentle slope and then they saw the crowded suburb forking out in all directions and dormant, like a suburb blasted by a touch. The night was clear; the sky thick with countless stars. A close, steaming smell crept along the streets, as if the breath of so many sleepers beneath those cold grey roofs was leaking out. Up and down, round and round! Every time they passed the top of the Mackays' street Owen stopped short and looked at the light above the fanlight in the Mackays' house. But Polly led him gently on, reminding him that she had the latchkey. Her feet were swollen and her legs ached intensely with hours of dancing, but she kept walking, walking. This was the chance she had waited for. She would never let him go until he had committed himself; no, not if she walked him round and round and up and down until the milkman clanked his cans on the stones. She began to talk of Dandie and Harriott, choosing her words and cautiously touching every string of her

companion's heart. Her quick metallic voice in the speechless night was like the sharp "ping" of a rifle.

"He's not such a catch, after all. Don't you think it's funny to live at an hotel after you're married? They haven't bought a stick of furniture. Most girls appreciate a man who has got a good home ready. What a fuss the Megsons have made! I call it stupid. Mamma wouldn't go, and Papa had a committee meeting. My brother Frank has gone to the West: he was spoons on Harriott. The men all ran after her."

"She was a very attractive girl," Owen said lamely, as she seemed to wait for him to respond.

"I never could see it." Polly slightly tossed her shrouded head. "But men carry on with girls like that—girls they wouldn't marry. I do wonder how she got hold of Mr. Darnell; there was something odd about that. Do you believe he's got a thousand a year? The Megsons always draw the long bow."

"I do not think there is any doubt about that. He is very well off," Owen said, unconsciously approaching Mrs. Megson's favourite expression.

"Well, he hasn't any brains, and brains are better than money. When I marry it shall be a clever man, a man with a profession. I should like a husband who had to make a position for himself in the world, so that I could help him do it."

They were softly patrolling Gammeridge Gardens. The gas in the Megsons' house had been turned out, but Mrs. Norris's bedroom was brightly lighted.

"And when you marry," Polly was saying earnestly, "wouldn't you like a wife who could make you comfortable? Mamma always brought me up to be do-

mesticated; she says that a man gets tired of a pretty face and a smart tongue, but never of a good dinner. Why, though Papa's got such a good position in the City, we wash all the light things at home just as if he were a clerk again."

"I should certainly like a domesticated wife," Owen said.

He was looking up at Mrs. Norris's window, at the shadows which passed swiftly across the blind. And he was thinking of Mrs. Megson's remark about a single man never working up a good family practice.

"Then, don't you think it was odd about Harriott?" Polly continued, in a hushed, dramatic voice, and turning her head away from him. "It's not a nice thing to talk about—to you. Fancy Mrs. Megson not being her mother, after all. Mamma laughed when she heard."

There was a pointed silence, during which she scanned his sulky, thoughtful face anxiously. She let the pink bow beneath her chin take care of itself, and insinuatingly slipped her bare hand through Owen's arm.

"I was very fond of poor Harriott," she said gently; "I felt sorry for her. She wasn't healthy. Mamma always says those big, pasty girls haven't a bit of strength. And she wasn't a happy disposition. A happy disposition helps you through the world, doesn't it? Papa has had his ups and downs, though you'd never think it to see us in that handsome house, keeping such a good table, would you? But he has, and he always says that if Mamma hadn't been of a cheerful disposition, and thoroughly domesticated, he might have been content to stay a clerk all his life."

She let her fingers slip until they touched his big hand, which was unsteady. His head dropped lower on his chin and his lips pouted out until they looked almost like the exaggerated lips of a negro.

"Harriott was a nice girl and full of fun in company. But Mrs. Megson could never keep a servant because of her, and I always think that's a sign. Wonder how she'll manage with servants of her own! She'd never have looked at Mr. Darnell if it hadn't have been for his thousand a year. She told me so; you know how girls talk together. She said she liked to lead a man on, but she'd never marry a pauper — any one who had to make every penny before he spent it. Now that's so different to me."

They were at the top of her street again. Owen looked at the blurred yellow eye of light above the door.

"You really must go in," he said, "it's past four."

Polly clutched more desperately at his arm. She was looking quite fagged and anxious by now. But she had made up her mind to go on until she dropped, or had induced him to propose.

"Very well," she assented meekly, "but not this way. It's such a beautiful night. Come round by the Vercomphit Road and up Urtica Villas."

It meant a circuit of four streets — only four streets, but she could take them very slowly.

They passed a house with a brass-plate gleaming on the door.

"That's Dr. Sharp's. Do you know him? Such an affable man. Mrs. Norris has him. He didn't buy an established practice, like you did, but he's just set up

on the chance, and they say he does a lot of business already. His wife is nice, and she calls on people and works it that way by being friendly. She called on us. That's where a doctor's wife can be so useful."

"Yes, I suppose a wife helps a doctor," Owen said thoughtfully.

"I should rather think she did. Why, she very often makes him." Polly gave a little scornful laugh at his mildly supposing a thing which was so absolutely certain. "Oh! Mrs. Sharp knows how to play her cards. She has an 'At Home' day and at Christmas she is going to give a children's party; my little sister Maggie's going. Is this the end of the Vercomphit Road? Oh, do come back and along the other side. I want to show you where Mr. Megson's sister lives. Just fancy! her husband serves in a boot shop.

"It's that one." Polly stood still and pointed to a house. "She has the parlours and kitchen and lets the top. Isn't it shameful, considering the money Mr. Megson spends on parties? I never could do a thing like that, could you? We don't give parties, but we don't live up to every penny of our income as they do. Papa always says that when his daughters marry they shan't go to a husband empty-handed."

The night was so still and starlit. Polly, with the instinct of devotion strong in us all when we want anything, looked up entreatingly to the pin-points of intense brilliance. What more could she say? What more could she do? Owen was so stubborn, so obviously anxious to get away from her. She was in a great rage. She longed to rate him soundly. She stood stock-still again and leaned against him slightly.

"What an awfully nice night! I wonder how Harriott will stand the trip across the Channel! Brixton will seem lost without her, and she told me a dozen times that she would never come near it again. She's as good as dead to all of us. Harriott and I were such chums: she told me everything. But she was a girl that you couldn't get very fond of—an odd kind of girl, like you read of in books. She wasn't practical; she never seemed half awake. And she seemed—didn't you ever notice it?—to be queer and different, like a girl that you'd go to bed and dream about."

She had touched the right string at last.

"You are quite right," Owen said in a more spirited voice. "A girl in a dream—a girl in a book—and who doesn't seem quite real! Now she"—he laughed awkwardly—"wouldn't be like Mrs. Sharp, would she?"

"Good gracious, no!" Polly's voice was delightfully innocent. "Why, I should be more the one to do a thing like that. Papa always says that I'm the business man of the family. If I married a doctor— Oh! Dr. Owen, whatever am I saying? You'll think—"

She broke off, much abashed. She stood, her head and her arms hanging, her cloak fallen back, and the twinkle of a diamond locket revealed on her flat, plum-draped chest.

"It sounded so forward," she jerked out, in hysterical puffs and quavers. "It never entered my head. I could cut my tongue out. I think I must be silly to-night. Fancy walking about with a man until nearly five o'clock in the morning—there's the quarter chiming—a man you're not engaged to. Harriott might have done it: she was the kind of girl men lark with

and take an advantage of. But I — you ought to have insisted on my going home two hours ago. I'm off my head: it's the Megsons' cheap champagne."

She looked up at him with the meek, affectionate expression, looked just for a moment, and then dropped her eyes in an agony of embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," he implored, "I'm sure you didn't mean anything — of course you didn't. It was a perfectly natural remark. And, look here, Miss Mackay — Polly — if you will consent to be my Mrs. Sharp I shall be very grateful — very much obliged to you. For I can't bear the thought of that upstart fellow cutting the ground from under my feet. I want to work up the practice; it is all I care about."

"Oh, Dr. Owens, I never thought — I never hoped that you were in love with me, although, to be sure, Frank used to chaff now and then," she said softly, standing first on one foot and then on the other because she was so dead tired.

"In love with you?" he repeated, with uncomplimentary dreaminess.

"We always thought — Mamma and I — that Harriott was the attraction," Polly said, with a mincing air of tenderness and banter. "And we felt so sorry for you, knowing what we did and —"

"Harriott!" he called out roughly. "Why talk about her? We agreed just now that she was hardly a woman at all."

He started striding towards the Mackays' street so quickly that Polly's weary, burning feet could hardly keep up with him. She panted a little when she reached her father's gate, and put out her hand. She half raised

her face, too, but it never occurred to Owen to kiss her.

"I'll make a very good Mrs. Sharp. You see!" she said, nodding at him playfully, and making her face plainer than usual by a laboured attempt at an arch expression.

She suddenly remembered that she had not actually clinched the proposal, and added:—

"To think that I am going to marry you! Wouldn't Harriott be surprised! She had such a fast way with men. She seemed to think you were her particular property."

"Good night," he said gently. "Good night, Miss Mackay — Polly."

"Good night." She peaked her long chin high and pouted out her lips. It dawned on his sluggish brain at last that perhaps a kiss was the usual thing.

He bent his head and just brushed her thin, pink line of mouth.

"Good night," she repeated cheerfully; "good morning, rather. You'll want to see Papa. He comes home from the City early to-morrow — to-day I mean."

CHAPTER V

"WE had better do the dining-room first," Harriott suggested in a subdued voice to Dandie.

Then she turned to the shopman and said aloud, with a delightful air of imperious condescension :—

"Dining-room suites, if you please."

He was a fair-haired, reedy young man. His manner was supercilious, the latter-day manner of the fashionable upholsterer conscious of art. He led them through rooms of brass beds, rooms of bloated mattresses, rooms of pianos, and rooms of Chippendale fresh from the factory, to a room of black oak. It was complete—from an ornate dresser and an overmantel with caryatides to an antique coal-box, which, when shut, would serve as a seat if you had the courage to hazard the bulgy carving.

Harriott looked depressed.

"This," said the young man with the lofty expression, "is our latest thing in dining-rooms."

He said it finally, as if the last, irrevocable word on dining-rooms had been spoken.

"Most handsome carving," added Dandie, with a languid air of criticism.

"I should think," said Harriott, letting her vague eyes rove over the black wood and lacquered brass, "that a dining-room like this would have a taste of coffin."

Dandie looked annoyed, and the upholsterer's gentleman seemed to instantly lose respect for her.

"At home," she continued, with an air of rebellion, "we had a sideboard with glass at the top. And the overmantel had glass, too. It was a cheerful wood, not oak."

"American walnut, Madam." The words seemed bitter in his mouth. "Out of date; we never show it to our better customers, though, of course" — he lifted his faint brows — "we can give you that sort of thing. Our stock is the most extensive in London."

Harriott turned aside with a deprecatory shrug and her peculiar smile, with tightly closed lips, to Dandie.

"We will have this suite," Dandie decided curtly, not even stopping to ask the price. He was vexed with Harriott. The shopman's supercilious smile and lofty reference to American walnut stung him.

"And now the drawing-room." She moved briskly away.

"We must put ourselves in his hands," Dandie said, with a faint scowl of caution, as the shopman preceded them, and the scene changed, through children's cots of lace and rose colour, to furniture of inlaid woods. "These people have excellent taste. They make a study of taste. They know the correct thing, of course."

"Of course," assented Harriott, submissively, throwing a look of disdain at the shopman, who paused impressively before an oddly shaped settee, covered with yellow brocade.

"You can have a suite in the Empire period," he informed them with an inert air, "or the Louis Seize, or the Japanese, or the Queen Anne—that is very

chaste. Or we can blend two styles very successfully. We supply them all to order."

Harriott looked at the yellow sofa as if she owed it a grudge. She was thinking of her waxen face. How would a cheek that always looked as if a buttercup were held up to it stand canary?

"We have them in blue," he said, evidently divining her objection, "or crimson. This is a brunette's colour, perhaps. In an age of harmony like the present, we study a customer's style in drawing-rooms."

They committed themselves to the suite in blue, and then turned their attention to bedrooms. Here Harriott recovered her composure; there had not been so great an artistic topsy-turvydom in this department. But a pitch-pine suite was not to be mentioned, and she was forbidden a duchesse dressing-table with an immense glass like Mrs. Megson's. Dandie, led by the upholsterer, selected a spider-legged affair, with a heart-shaped mirror. Her interest collapsed when it came to the kitchen, but she plunged recklessly in house linen. They had lunch before they attacked china and glass, and this department took up so much time that they had to scamper through curtains and carpets for fear of not being back at the hotel in time for dinner.

It was raining heavily when they went outside. Harriott walked from the shop door to the hansom with the step of an empress. Never before had she shopped on such a magnificent scale. And her triumph over the supercilious assistant was complete. He had become less egotistical at an increasing ratio as the bill swelled, until by the time they had chosen the last carpet he positively grovelled. They had never grovelled

at Brixton; Mrs. Megson soon had discouraged anything of that sort by shrewd questions about durability and shameless quotations of the prices at other shops.

London was putting on its night air of mystery. The gas-lamps were baleful through the fog; the figures of pedestrians under umbrellas were like uncanny, moving fungi. Tomatoes and parsley in the windows of small Italian cafés were more vividly red and green than in daytime; the huge bars of chocolate, like mouldings of dark wood, filled Harriott with longing.

She snuggled up to Dandie in the narrow limits of the rocking hansom.

"Whatever happens in the future," she said, with a tremor in her tender voice, "you may say to yourself that I was absolutely, wickedly happy while we were furnishing the flat. If I die first—one of us must be first: it frightens me; I wake up in the night quite cold with the thought of it—if I die first, you'll look at the black dining-room and the blue drawing-room; you may look at the very table-cloths, if they are not worn out, and say to yourself that I was positively and completely happy, for the first time in my life, the day I chose them. A home of our own makes things seem real and safe. I've always had a sneaking horror that you might be the fairy prince, and that a word or look would break the spell and throw me back to Brixton."

"What nonsense you talk!" he said chidingly, but putting his arm loosely round her. "You shouldn't; people don't understand. I want my wife to be absolutely well-bred. It is not the correct thing to talk too much or to have unusual opinions. And you are inclined to be morbid; only unhealthy people are morbid."

"Well, I am healthy enough," she declared, squaring her broad shoulders with the old insolent gesture of virility which had always struck at Owen like cold steel after Mrs. Megson's burst of confidence; "and I must try to break myself of talking nonsense."

She leaned back and kept very quiet for half a mile or so. Her eyes, through the zigzag veil, were fixed hungrily on her husband. She was so happy. There would be no longer any wrong settings to life. People would be harmonious. She was already beginning to find out that this was only another word for well-bred. Dandie was the keystone of her life. She was unconscious of the thick streak of prig in him. He was so handsome, so well dressed, so elegant. She loved his drawling, haughty voice. She loved to see him take out his lizard-skin cigar-case bound in silver, or his equally dainty and effeminate pocket-book. She used to finger the bottles and caskets in his dressing-bag; she had never come into actual contact with such daintiness before. His trim, golden mustache, well-kept nails, and expression of gentle boredom fascinated and rather awed her. Sometimes she fancied herself quite uncouth and loud by contrast. He was faintly stupid too. She found that restful. She was so full of moods that his even temper and indolent, everyday way of taking life refreshed her. Once she had longed to be clever, to distinguish herself in some way, but now she had learnt wisdom: clever people were a great nuisance to every one, and most of all to themselves.

"What a blessing," she said suddenly, with a great gulp of relief, "that I haven't to catch the Brixton 'bus or wait on the suburban platform for the Brixton train!"

Dandie laughed at her vehemence over such a trifle.

"We'll let the Megsons slide, with your permission, darling," he said, with a sneer on his womanish red mouth.

They were coming to another café. She could see the ubiquitous tomatoes, like spheres of flame, licked by the green-tongued parsley; she could see the moulded chocolate with the gilt letters. A sudden impulse caught her, and she gripped Dandie by the arm.

"Tell him to stop," she said, standing up and trying to reach the trap-like opening with her own hand; "I want to get out and dine at this place instead of going back to the hotel. It will be a change."

Dandie looked out. The place was respectable, and it was less trouble to indulge Harriott than to combat her. All he said was, "The wine is sure to be bad."

It was a long, narrow place, with seats covered in dusty red velvet, square, marble-topped tables, a counter and pay-box at the street end, and a door leading to the kitchens at the other. There was a cadaverous Italian waiter, with a limp shirt-front and a shiny black suit, who began to feverishly flip at the tables when they came in. Two men, perhaps City clerks, with a steak apiece, sat at one table; at the end of the room, with her back to everything and every possible one who came in, was a lady. Harriott could only get a view of loose hair, a wonderful little hat of some iridescent stuff, and a coat of striped cloth.

Dandie sat down as far as he could from the two City men, who were staring rudely at Harriott. The tablecloth was a bad colour and wine-slopped; the serviette he flicked daintily away from him before he took up the

wine list. Harriott had the bill of fare, one corner of which looked as if it had been dipped in coffee. She was greedily studying the sweets. When Dandie asked her opinion about white wine or red she was quite indifferent.

It was a piquant little dinner, perhaps with a slight preponderance of sauce.

"I can't think how they can do it for half a crown," Harriott said in a husky undertone as she drew on her gloves, while Dandie prepared the point of a cigar.

She settled her back against the red velvet. The City men paid their bill, slung on their overcoats, and passed out, giving her a last look. The isolated lady at the end, who had worked steadily through the bill of fare, poured the last drop from her bottle of white Capri, and ordered coffee. Dandie's cigar smoke and the glass of maraschino with which he had indulged her as an experience were muddling Harriott. The narrow place, reeking of cookery and patrolled by the ghoulis waiter, seemed unreal. The iridescent hat of the lady in the corner scintillated like a miniature hillock formed of evil eyes.

Dandie's face was tender through the smoke as he looked at his wife. But although he was unusually tender he was critical of her. His attitude was always one of criticism. He thought that she was not dressed quite correctly. Her hat was odd—a flabby thing of pink ribbon, beaded lace, ostrich tips, and Parma violets. Her coat was wrong, though he didn't know why, and he must persuade her not to wear those leather gloves like a man's. She put one strong, leather-cased hand into his, under the kindly cover of the grubby table-cloth.

"I'm so happy," she said in a hazy voice. "Isn't life

beautiful? I should like to go on living until we are ninety — you and I, only you and I."

Dandie returned the pressure of her hand, which was unusual for him; he was nervous of tenderness in public.

"Not only you and I," he said, with a low, constrained laugh. "People have children — family life. That is why one marries."

A jealous pang shot through Harriott. So she wasn't everything to him. She wouldn't suffice for always. She came back to the world with a quick clearing of the brain.

The lady in the corner was paying her bill. She gave the waiter the overflow coppers with the generosity of a man. Dandie was watching her. She was slowly drawing on her gloves — spotless and perfect of fit, pearl grey.

"I must find out where Ann is," he said suddenly, as if the silvery gloves had influenced him. "She would be a useful friend to you. A most elegant little woman; she would give you hints about dress, and so on."

The world was growing more and more real to Harriott. The café was sordid and reeked of garlic. She threw a pained look at Dandie. The truth was slowly filtering from him — she wasn't perfection in his eyes.

"Who is Ann?" she said sharply.

"Haven't I ever told you?" He seemed flattered by her obvious jealousy and pain. "Her father and mine were partners in business. When the partners died we went shares, Ann and I, in a very decent fortune. The old men wanted us to marry, and it would have been a very good arrangement."

"And wasn't she willing?" Harriott asked dully.

Dandie smiled complacently.

"The woman is generally willing. It wasn't that; I really think I should have married Ann if I had not met you, darling."

"What is her other name?"

"Chance — Ann Chance."

Harriott laughed harshly.

"Ann Chance! What a queer name! She sounds like a popular murderess. Don't introduce me to your Ann Chance. I'm sure I should hate her."

The lady at the end table was coming slowly down the narrow passage to the street end of the café. Directly Dandie saw her face he started up with an exclamation of intense surprise. Harriott felt cold and miserable and sick. She told herself that it must be the patties — made with butter slightly rancid — but she knew that it was nothing of the kind. Instinct had told her that this little grey-striped creature was Ann Chance — the woman who had nearly married Dandie. She was coming gracefully down between the tables, each shrouded in dingy white, like so many square, regularly set coffins. So this woman was Ann Chance; she was certain of that before Dandie spoke. And Ann Chance was malignant; she felt certain of that too.

Ann started guiltily when Dandie spoke; she looked as if she had been found out.

"I've never been to this place before," she said. "I generally dine at my club. But one gets a little tired of women. Dear things!"

"Your club!"

"Oh, yes, I gave up housekeeping; my cook drank

and my housemaid was secretly married to the milkman. Trying, wasn't it?"

Harriott was staring rudely, trying hard to pick holes in her. She looked big and sulky and awkward on the red-stuffed seat. Ann looked at her casually and seemed ill at ease until Dandie said, with the magnificent air of possession so delightful in young husbands, —

"My wife."

The least little quiver shook Ann, as if she had received the slightest of galvanic shocks. Then she just touched the hand which Harriott stuck out awkwardly and said: —

"We must be friends. It is only natural that I should take an interest in Daniel's wife. No doubt he has told you all about me."

Harriott said nothing; her usual pert flow of talk was dammed up. Dandie, who was irritably anxious that she should make a good impression, thought that she had never before been so big and clumsy and stupidly silent. He would have much preferred her irresponsible chatter. Ann went on talking brightly to him. She had sunk down sideways on a bent-wood chair, and the three wore the air of a family party.

"If we had not met in this place to-night we might never have met at all," she said lightly; "London is so big. You thought I was in Leeds still, and I — well, I didn't think of you at all. You could hardly expect it."

She threw him a look of meaning, and Harriott, who saw that, as she saw everything else, burned with rage.

She was miserably jealous and envious of Ann already. She had Dandie's intangible elegance. From her glittering hat to her trim shoes she was in violent

opposition to the women of Brixton, to Harriott herself. Her striped suit looked like a man's flannel shirt, but the cut of it was wonderful. The little touch of purple velvet at her throat made Harriott painfully conscious of the defects of her own necktie. She had a beautiful throat, and she carried her head rather far back with a graceful loll. Her features were perfect, small and straight, her eyes were well opened and clear grey. With a good complexion she would have been beautiful. But her dingy skin was Harriott's only consolation. She looked at this little woman, complete, dainty, conscious of attractiveness, with the piquantly affected pose of a Parisian doll, and she cursed herself for the fatal quality of impulsiveness which had often got her into scrapes at Brixton, and which to-night had crossed her happiness. If she had not been attracted by the logs of chocolate and the red and green vegetables in the café window, she would have been dining at the hotel. She would have kept Dandie all to herself. The chances were that, in a collection of minor worlds like London, Ann Chance would never have intruded into theirs.

"We'll have a four-wheeler," she heard Dandie say expansively. "You must come back with us to the hotel and have a long talk with Harriott. We are staying at Marshall's until our flat in Oxford Street is ready."

CHAPTER VI

HARRIOTT often wondered why she had ever distrusted Ann. For nearly two years Ann was her mentor, her constant companion. Ann opened her eyes to the fact that a coat and skirt which cost less than five guineas was not fit to wear, and that blue serge was never seen off a yacht, or perhaps at Henley. Harriott, who had been so proud of her trousseau, packed away the clothes made by the Brixton dressmaker, with all other Brixton appurtenances. Her whole past was corded round in the big black trunk in the dressing-room. She joined Ann's club; it was Ann who told her how to marshal her servants and arrange Dandie's dinners. Ann said that an omnibus was not a proper vehicle for a gentlewoman — when Harriott once inadvertently alluded to trams she seemed never to have heard of them. Ann suggested the plays, for which Dandie submissively booked three stall tickets; Ann shared in the subscription to Mudie's, and told Harriott which day she was to set apart for the reception of her friends — though they had not many friends: London is not the place for a young couple without extraordinary qualities to make them. Ann brought a few women from her club, and Dandie brought a few bachelor men from his, and here Harriott's experience of London society ended.

She talked glibly of particular shops as the only ones

in London where you could buy a shirt to fit or a tie that was not vulgar. Once when a woman at the club spoke of Westbourne Grove, she laughed a laugh with a hollow ring, and said that she had never penetrated to it. It was her boast — as an echo of Ann's — that she knew nothing of the suburbs, those savage tracts stretching away on all sides from the civilised world, which was Bond Street. She was not exactly lying: she had nearly grown to believe that Brixton had been a bad dream. It was so long ago.

She bought a poodle and decorated it with silver bangles: the poodle was a beast of fashion at that time. She smoked an occasional scented cigarette, just for the feel of the thing and as a declaration of independence. She loved to hail a hansom for a short distance, and to go shopping, not because she wanted things, but for the mere sake of spending money.

She was very sorry when Ann decided to go to Leeds on a long visit, and had learnt her part so well that she rallied her friend on the folly of leaving town before the season was half over.

Ann smiled and looked at the colourless face and big dull eyes reflectively.

"You have been an apt pupil," she said; "eighteen months ago you would not have spoken like that. I hate leaving London, but I love Leeds. It is my home; ask Dandie to tell you about it. He was born there."

"Is there a season at Leeds?" drawled Harriott, with the intent air of a person inquiring if there were an atmosphere.

Ann laughed.

"A season! Well, the inhabitants may think there

is. But, my dear, it is a terrible place, rather worse than Brixton, where you came from, and you know what that means."

Harriott flushed.

"What has Dandie been telling you?" she asked abruptly.

"Everything—as he always does. Don't look so guilty. This elegance which we women—of a certain school—affect is all trick—mere humbug! If we were quite sure of ourselves we shouldn't do it. There was a discussion at the club the other day about classes. Women's clubs should never discuss. Some one asked how we could distinguish between the upper middle class and the lower middle class. One said it was whether you kept one servant or two; another if you lived in the suburbs—a house in a row; somebody else said you were ostracised if you had ever done the washing at home, and another one that you were lower middle class without doubt if you had been seen to open your own front door or walk down the street with a market basket. You should have seen the faces! Why, you are flushing and wriggling yourself. We were all touched in some sensitive spot; it won't do the club any good. Mrs. Ellis has threatened to resign because she thought Miss Green Gibbons was getting at her. That would be a pity, because Mrs. Ellis is always bringing people to dinner, and we can only make the club pay by the meals. I think myself that only an idle woman can be a lady: she has time to cultivate grace. I flared up when a distinction was drawn between trades and professions. Dandie's father and mine were only tradesmen on a magnificent scale. It was something in cloth—

every one is cloth up there. That is why we are so careful to do the correct thing. What was your father?"

"He belonged to a county family," admitted Harriott, with conscious pride.

"Then I don't see why you need be so careful," cried Ann, with a light laugh, as she tripped to the glass to tidy her veil.

She gave a look round the drawing-room of the elegant little flat.

"You want some new things," she decided, running her quick eye along the crowded shelves of bric-à-brac. "Have you seen those delightful little monsters at Murray's? They are quite new; I am taking a dozen up to Leeds. Why don't you put away these frilled cushions? They have frills in all the cheap shops now. Put on your hat and we'll drive down Bond Street. I want some packets of concentrated violets for my bath. One can't get clean without them."

She went off to Leeds the week after, and Harriott managed to get through her frivolous days alone. She was perfectly happy — shopping without reason, spending shillings on cabs more carelessly than she had once expended pence on trams, driving to the manicure's, to the hairdresser's, to the tailor's; tearing the heart out of a dozen fashionable periodicals at the club, and decorating her rooms with flowers and flimsinesses of the art shops.


If it had lasted! She was so happy and healthy, so perfectly fed and groomed, and satisfied in all her senses. She forgot that she had ever fancied herself possessed of a brain, that she had actually been guilty

of certain ambitions; she was not unpleasantly conscious even of a body. And yet she felt all through that it could not last — it was an interlude. The one little flaw in her perfect days was Dandie's occasional pettishness. He did not seem so absolutely, so entirely satisfied as she was.

If it could have lasted! She looked back at it so often, with such heart-rending, passionate bitterness, in after days — this careless time of an exquisite taste in ties and a freshness for hansoms, of first nights in the stalls and dainty dining out. She looked back at it as the one reposeful time of her life: a smooth, sweet layer between the irritation of Brixton and the tragedy already looming. A merciful time of opiates!

She was angry and afraid when the change was hinted at. She spoke of it to Dandie one night after dinner. She had been trying to tell him for many days. She curled up on the rug at the foot of the deep saddle-bag chair where he was half lying, reading the evening paper. She smoothed the back of his hand until he drew it sharply away, as if a fly had tickled it. He was more irritable and politely morose than usual that night. She crouched on the floor, staring up at him with her eyes full of water. Either he was ill, or he had lost his love for her. Such little things put him out of temper; to-night it had been the fish. She was more afraid and anxious than ever. If greasy fish disturbed him, how would he stand her disquieting news?

She said abruptly at last, knocking his paper flat on his knee with the palm of her large, white hand: "You said once—at the café, the night we met Ann—that you did not want to live with me until I was ninety—



not alone. Well — you needn't. There! Don't be angry, Dandie, please. I cannot help it."

He was slow to take in a new idea, and she had expressed this one so crudely. She scrambled to her feet, and stood up straight in her elaborate, trailing tea-gown, staring at him in a piteous, beseeching way, with her loose mouth and her long, narrow nostrils quivering. She seemed to twitch all over with anxiety.

Dandie's face grew wonderfully tender. She had never seen him look quite like it before. It was more than tenderness; something deeper and more sacred. She had never credited him with being capable of that unclassable something which means character.

He sprang up from the lounging chair at last, when he was sure, and held her in his arms for a long time without a word. When he spoke his voice shook.

"Rio, darling, I am so glad. I've been waiting for it. People without children get tired of each other. It is not a natural marriage. It makes more misery than anything else."

"You are glad!"

"My darling, delighted. We have been married two years. It has worried me. You must write at once and tell your Aunt Megson. She will advise. You must take every possible care."

Harriott wrenched herself away from him. She looked at his tender, handsome face, pink and glowing with emotion, in bewilderment. For the first time in their married life he had shown a lack of tact. It was bad enough to have to face the inevitable. But he actually congratulated her on it. She had been prepared for condolence, for a little mutual bewailing of

an unfortunate circumstance. He staggered her. He was overjoyed; it was the lack of children which had embittered him. And — as if affairs were not provoking enough — he ordered her back to her Aunt Megson.

She wrote docilely to Brixton next day, and the day after Mrs. Megson came.

"Though your uncle is very put out at the way Daniel has behaved," she said, after she had kissed Harriott and taken off her bonnet. "You never come near us; you have never made a party for us here. We got tired of asking you down to us, you made so many petty excuses."

"Brixton is such a long way off," Harriott said deprecatingly.

"Daniel did not think so when you were engaged," retorted her aunt. "We were very kind to him then. However, he does not matter, but *you* are my sister's child, and I always looked upon you as my own. I told your uncle that I should come."

She did come — once or twice every week. Harriott was slavishly afraid that one of the smart women from the club would drop in and find her there — she mouthed so much, and tossed her head, and applied Brixton as a comparison to everything. She complained bitterly because they lived in the out-of-the-way district of Oxford Street. It was a day's journey. Trams were so uncertain from the bottom of Gammeridge Gardens; trains to Victoria were most awkward, and the jolting of the 'buses upset her. She thought the flat pokey, and could not think why Daniel did not take a nice house "a little way out."

Harriott shivered. The expression "a little way out"

meant so much that was unbearable. It meant everything that disgusted and annoyed her.

"You can't stop here when the baby comes," Mrs. Megson said with authority. "A baby turns the place upside down. You want a nice house with every convenience with an infant. Of course you'll make your nursemaid rub out the flannels and bibs and small things like that. I suppose you have to put out everything — even the kitchen cloths. I thought they were an awful colour; the door was open when I came by, and the girl was washing up the breakfast things. There should be two of them — one to wash and one to wipe. You ought to tell her to do the silver first, and then the cups, and then the greasy plates. I wouldn't trust those sanitary laundries with my things — to tear and burn to rags. I should stifle without a garden; ours is looking so nice just now. Your uncle has had the paths fresh gravelled. Fancy having to put on your bonnet every time you want a breath of fresh air!"

She was rolling her eyes round the room as she spoke, not missing a detail.

"You must waste a lot of money in knickknacks. Ah! you'll find a difference when you get a family." She gave her irritating laugh. "Never a week passes but there's some little thing. Your hand is always in your pocket."

Harriott sat pouring out the tea with an air of reserve. Her face was contemptuous and obstinate; her ear was on the alert. She was in agony lest there should be a smart play on the little brass knocker. If one of the women from the club should come in, her aunt would be sure to talk of Brixton.

"Why, look at our house!" she was saying, as she gurgled the strong tea down her throat, and spread her handkerchief like a Lilliputian apron in her lap. "Mr. Megson does not pay so much for it, taxes and all, as Daniel does for this dark little hole. Fancy having to burn gas in the bedroom half the day! A nice bill you'll have in at the end of the quarter! And I couldn't stand the waste of coal; you may be sure that the hall porter keeps himself in firing out of the lodgers."

Harriott squirmed at the word "lodgers." She said, in her flippant, scornful way:—

"He would be a fool or an archangel if he didn't. There are twenty different coal-cellars."

"Don't talk nonsense, my dear. A good wife studies her husband's pocket. It is fortunate that Daniel's is pretty deep: you would bring a poor man to the work-house. Look at Polly Mackay—Polly Owens she is now. I should like you to see how beautifully she keeps her home. *She's* expecting in May, too; that's the second—the first was a boy. Such a fine fellow! She brought him round in the mail-cart yesterday. Dr. Owens was asking only the other morning if you had any family."

Harriott circled her spoon in the cup thoughtfully. She was sorry that Owen had married, although Polly Mackay had been her own suggestion.

"With a house of your own you could ask friends down. It seems so makeshift to live in apartments. Just see how we entertain! Twenty-five people last Friday week. Hasn't Daniel any friends? Ours is such a convenient neighbourhood. It's only a twopenny

ride to the West-end. Why, we have a beautiful theatre in the Brixton Road, with tip-top companies. We went the other night with the Owenses and the Mackays. And now I must be off. Your uncle is vexed if I am out when he comes home from the City."

"I will see you into an omnibus," Harriott said, rising with alacrity.

She always piloted her aunt out of the Mansions. One was never sure of her. She might take it into her head to lecture the hall porter on the sin of stealing coal, or read some other tenant a homily on the advantages of a "little way out" and the selectness of Gammeridge Gardens.

As the time grew near Mrs. Megson came more frequently, and Dandie was more at his club in consequence. Whenever they met—which was not often—he was elaborately polite, and inquired after Mr. Megson with scrupulous concern. But neither he nor Harriott ever went to Brixton: there was always some plausible reason why not.

"Though you ought to come for a day's shopping," Mrs. Megson impressed on her niece. The kind-hearted, childless soul was full of advice and sagacity on baby clothes. "Things are just as good in the Brixton Road and ever so much cheaper. And the style is quite correct; some very swell people live in Brixton. I was looking at the shops in Oxford Street as I came along. They want as much again for white petticoats as they do down our way, and not a bit better."

Harriott only smiled in a superior, sneering fashion, and brought out piles of exquisite hand-made garments

of the newest cut, and expressive in every small gore and slope of the very latest hygienic fad.

"I bought them in Bond Street," she said. "There is a special depot: the Duchess gets all her things there. They were sending a robe to the Palace yesterday when I chose this cloak."

She was very bored about the baby, and felt angry with it already, but she meant it to be up to date, and as she flashed along the streets in a hansom — she never walked as time went on, except to pack Mrs. Megson securely in an omnibus at the Circus — she looked with languid interest at the shops where they sold perambulators. It took her days to decide between fawn lined with shell pink or pure white lined with tan.

The baby came in May — just two years and a half after the marriage. It came on Sunday morning, when Oxford Street was quiet, and the church bells rang out and mixed with the clangour of the coster market in the slum at the back of the Mansions. Dandie had been walking over the flat, winding his way out of one small room and into another, in a frenzy of hope and terror. He did not know what he might gain or lose that morning. The steady fall of his feet comforted Harriott; no one else seemed to hear them. The world was only Dandie. Directly everything was over she implored them to let her see him. When he came she was quite shy. The emotions of that second — while he advanced from the door to the bed — stayed with her for life. She did not even notice, with her usual fierce sense of jealousy and entire possession, that he looked first at the little swaddled, purple-headed bundle lying on her limp arm. The nurse had dressed it and put it there.

Harriott never even looked at it until they turned Dandie out, and she heard the outer door shut softly and knew that he had gone to his club.

When she looked she was conscious of a very bitter disappointment. It was all very well to regard it as an interloper, as she had done from the very start, but she had been faintly excited and hopeful about it in spite of herself. She had felt, once or twice, that perhaps there was an even more satisfied life in prospect—a life made up of something more than smart club and reckless shopping. But this! What an ugly, foolishly solemn-looking thing! An uncanny thing, with her own soul and perhaps some of Dandie's struggling to shine out from those expressionless, slit-like eyes. It seemed all fat, raw flesh, scored by wrinkles. It was like an inflated, scalded mummy. Was this maternity? Was this the delicious sensation that one read of, and that now and again she had felt twinge through her as she chose the baby clothes or glanced out from the hansom at the perambulator shops? She did not care for this gross, solemn creature. It made her arm feel stiff and dead. She wanted to go to sleep and ignore it.

But in the night she woke. It was a beautiful May night with a full moon that pierced the blind, and made the small bedroom of the flat a silver cove. She hardly recognised the room. This could not be the dingy compartment-like place with the cretonne draperies, smeared with smuts—the room where you had to burn gas on most winter days.

And then she felt the stiffness in her arm and looked down. It was awake, if such a new, mysterious thing

discriminated between sleeping and waking. This eerie thing, her child, was staring at her with its fixed, vacant eyes. It was her child! She drew it closer to her, as she lay helpless and weak in the bed, while the nurse breathed loudly in the adjoining dressing-room. She stared, too, and so they kept "eyes to eyes" for a long while. She fancied that there was wonder in those eyes, and then she fancied that there was love and entreaty. The maternal sensation of which she had been so scornful, so sceptical, broke over her like a fierce wave, and burst and lapped her. She shut her eyes and floated on it, with the child held protectingly in the warm hollow of her bent arm.

Mrs. Megson came on Monday afternoon. As she would have expressed it, she felt cold all down her back when she stood on the threshold of the hushed and scented lying-in-room. She thought involuntarily of Five Yew standing alone in the deserted, shaven harvest-fields. She thought of its low-pitched rooms, stained face of plaster, and little windows. She thought of the nightjar which croaked near the house, and of the red cows which fed close to the neglected garden. She had never forgotten the awful solitude and dankness of that place, nor forgotten Rosalie lying dead upstairs in a room with a sloping ceiling, where thin fingers of ivy tapped against the panes of greenish glass in the casement. Harriott, straight and pale in the bed, was startlingly like poor Rosalie. Whenever Mrs. Megson read anything in the papers about Siberia or solitary confinement she thought of Five Yew.

She had been hoping all through that Harriott's child would not be a Wicken. She did not believe, of

course, that you could inherit a passion for strong drink, but old Mrs. Gatley's garrulous talk had made a strong impression on her, and all the details of it came back vividly now that another baby—a Wicken in part—had wailed its way into the world.

She stood on the threshold for a second or two. Harriott languidly wondered why she waited, and the nurse reproachfully muttered of draught and tucked the head flannel more closely round the child.

She saw her sister Rosalie, stiff at Five Yew, with an awful look of secrecy on her face; she saw her sister's husband stretched along the stone floor of the room with a window at each end—a room with a cavernous fireplace and a ceiling that seemed ready to drop down on your head, it was so low and cracked, so yellowed by wood smoke—a wretched room, only fit for a stable, as Mr. Megson had said. She saw Heber Wicken, as she had seen him on the morning following Harriott's birth, with a gash across his throat, a gash so deep, so sure, that it pouted like a great ripe mouth.

Harriott must never be told that her father had killed himself. To commit suicide was so vulgar, and the one thing that Mrs. Megson dreaded was vulgarity.

She pulled herself together and kissed her niece, and insisted on hauling the baby out of bed. She took it on her knee. The trained nurse, all snowy lappets and streamers, was eying her disapprovingly.

"Nurse says it is a fine baby," said Harriott in her strangely weak voice.

Mrs. Megson did not look at the face—not at first. She pulled the safety-pins out of the long flannel, and bared the mottled limbs as a matter of course.

"It is a beautiful girl," she said at last, lusciously rubbing her doughy hands up and down the flesh, and making vague cooings and cluckings. "What legs! I never *saw* such a fine baby. Twice the size of Polly Owens's. She had a girl, too, the day before yesterday."

Then she put the long flannel to rights again, pursing her mouth and tossing her head at the garments of emancipated cut and fabric, and then it occurred to her to look at the baby's head.

"A lot of hair—it will all come off: it always does. And is it like Daniel or like you? They say that just for the first day or two a baby is the image of one of the parents. You were the very double of your poor mother—but such a little rat."

"The baby is not in the least like Mr. Darnell," interpolated the nurse, with her exaggerated enunciation and laboured attempt at a cultivated voice.

Mrs. Megson looked at her coldly.

"I don't suppose you have seen enough of Mr. Darnell to know," she said, with the air of keeping her severely in her place. She resented a nurse who was a fine lady, just as she resented baby clothes of strange cut. A monthly nurse should be old, fat, and not overclean; she should cluck to the baby—this woman touched it with cold, gingerly delicacy, as if she were touching a piece of mechanism.

Tea came in; the nurse poured out, and helped herself as a matter of course.

"You ought to have a special cake for the lying-in-room, my dear," said Mrs. Megson. "Polly Owens had one with her first baby—the doctor's sister sent

it from Wales. A nasty, greasy-looking thing. I wouldn't touch it; you know how bilious I am."

The baby cried out savagely.

"Poor little lamb! Perhaps you've got a pin in the binder," said Mrs. Megson, as the nurse almost snatched it from her knee. "Now it is quite awake, Harriott, I must have a good look at its dear little face. It's sure to be the image of Daniel."

She glared at the nurse, finished her tea, and went up to the woman, who was administering milk and water with an egg spoon.

"Let me see your face, my beauty," she said, putting her hand on the child's head with an air of authority and pushing the head flannel well back.

She looked—her plump, comfortable body quivered with memory. She saw the Wicken face. It was the strongly characteristic face of the decadent county family into which Rosalie had been so proud to marry; the face of the Wickens, startlingly, faithfully reproduced in this infant. The mark of some progenitor which is set so strongly on every new-born baby was unmistakable on this child of Harriott's. It was like her; it had taken from her just as much as she had taken from her father. But of Daniel, with his clear, glassy eyes, peachy skin, and expression of perfect, rather foolish placidity there was no trace.

Such a baby! Its very cry hardly human yet; its tiny strange hand crinkled and screwed up. The eyes without expression, the mouth toothless, the nose only a suggestion of a feature. Yet commonplace Mrs. Megson stared at the bald, angry-looking head with a feeling akin to horror. She felt afraid of the child;

she could not have put the feeling into words. She did not know what she dreaded; she fancied, though she was the last woman in the world to indulge in the weird and fantastic, that all the tragic possibilities of the Wicken blood ran in this child. She could not get the dead man out of her eyes. She could see him lying along the stones,—damp stones, for the day was rainy and the soil strong clay,—she could see the long vivid streak across the throat.

She let the flannel slip down over the vacant eyes and asked the nurse faintly for a glass of wine. The woman put the child back in the bed. She looked at her coldly when she gave her the glass, looked insolently, saying with her eyes what she dared not say with her lips—that she thought the visitor had drunk wine enough before she came. She might be forgiven for thinking so: Mrs. Megson's hands quivered, her bonnet was awry, and her eyes were strained wide with an odd expression.

Daniel came in as she drained the last drop of port. He was quite cordial, reverting to his old manner before his marriage. He was in the first gush of pater-nity and it made him temporarily tolerant. He was very grateful to Mrs. Megson; he thought that she had saved Harriott from many imprudences during the last few months. But Harriott, whose strong point was not gratitude, wanted her aunt to go now that Dandie had come. She wanted to have Dandie all to herself. It was no fault of hers if her constitution only permitted her to love one person in the world and to be indifferent to every one else. She cared for no one, not even the baby. That sensation of the night before had been

a dream. There was no one in the world but Dandie. She wanted Mrs. Megson to go back to Gammeridge Gardens and never cross the Thames again. But Dandie, who had sat down on the edge of the bed, was talking to her aunt with the confidential air of a relation. They were discussing a name for the baby. He suggested Betty, and Mrs. Megson cried aloud at the vulgarity of the name. The nurse, putting her word in as usual, told them that her last patient's child had been called Muriel, and that she, the nurse, had been asked to the christening.

"Muriel! That is a common name, only chosen by common people," said Mrs. Megson, sweepingly. "The little urchins who come yelping out of the Board Schools have names like that. Now the Owenses are going to call their girl Margaret. You remember Dr. Owens, Daniel? He had supper at our house last night, and was *so* interested when I told him about the baby."

"Call her Harriott," said the mother from her bed. "That is a family name. All the women of my family for generations have been called Harriott—spelt as mine is spelt—haven't they, Aunt?"

"Don't call it Harriott!" cried Mrs. Megson superstitiously, knowing what she knew.

But Dandie, whose nice sense was flattered by a family name, caught at the idea eagerly, and he and Harriott settled it there and then.

CHAPTER VII

"Buy me a prayer-book," Harriott said impulsively, stopping before a book-shop as she and Dandie strolled down Oxford Street in the sun. "Ann and I are going to church to-morrow morning and for a walk in the Park afterwards. It is the correct thing to do : I really do not know why I have not done it before ; it gives a reason for Sunday, a day I always detest. It is so invertebrate — late breakfast and a novel. There is nothing to do ; one can't shop, the club is empty, and Baby is always more of a nuisance than usual. It is very nice to have Ann back ; she is coming in this afternoon to show me my places. Of course I don't want to look awkward — it is such bad taste to be irreligious. But she says that I shall pull through very well if I skip the collect and a few other things just to begin with."

Dandie, always impressed by the correct thing, turned docilely in at the door. Harriott fluttered over prayer-books and hymn-books for twenty minutes, weighing the advantages of coloured leather over black, or of ivory over everything. Finally she came out smiling, with a couple of dainty brown-bound volumes, gilt-edged, marked by an exaggerated gilt cross and smelling deliciously. She took a long sniff before she handed them over to Dandie to put in his pocket.

"And when I go to-morrow," she said, with an air of solemnity, "be sure you give me a threepenny bit —

they never come my way, and Ann says a threepenny bit is quite enough — to put in the pool."

She stopped, smiled, stared at Dandie's mildly scandalised face, and stammered apologetically: —

"The bag — the collecting-box, I mean. I'm very sorry. At Aunt Megson's we never went to church, and we were always playing 'Nap.' That accounts for my mistake, doesn't it? These terms are so confusing."

"You have no reverence," said Dandie, looking quite frightened, as if he feared that she had, by her flippant speech, stirred up some angry deity. He added: "Women ought always to be religious. My mother was a very pious woman; she found it a great comfort."

"And your father found it an equal convenience, no doubt," Harriott returned, with artless sympathy. "Uncle Megson was always bothering Aunt to go to church on Sunday morning so that he could read the paper in peace. But she only sat at the window and described the people's bonnets to him."

"Religion is becoming in a woman," Dandie repeated. "I like reverence in a woman."

"I am very reverent," Harriott assured him, in a hushed, sober sort of way. "I should think religion would be a tremendous stand-by if you were in trouble. It is a sedative, the last resource of the broken down. The real thing I mean — you seldom meet it. Going to church is only a habit. It sours people. That must be the effect of the sermon. Sermons are superfluous — the overflow of a fool. Only stupid people preach, clever ones suggest."

She went on, warming to her subject, and laying down the law in her characteristic, arrogant, final way.

"I've known religious people—the common or garden sort—the Mackays for instance. They were so mean. They were cursed with the vice called thrift. That is religious people all over—they want to make provision both for this world and the next."

It was September. There was a twang of crispness in the air; the big drapers made a half-hearted, comfortable show of furs. Harriott, her own dogmatic sermon ended, walked along the dry, white pavement with a springy step.

"Oh, don't go home yet," she besought, as Dandie wheeled round opposite the Marble Arch. "I'll take you to lunch at the club. We can give you a very good lunch—no sweets. You really must come to the club. It is a grand idea. You must write your name in the visitors' book—that is all the toll we exact. We women are not so churlish as you are—we welcome a man and make much of him."

"It is quite impossible," Dandie said, stepping steadily on. "You must get back to the child."

"But she is weaned," Harriott said conclusively.

"It ought to be a pleasure to be with her, not a duty," he retorted with his best pedagogic, paternal air.

"I've been so good," she reminded him coaxingly, "I nursed her for more than a year; one woman at the club said I was purely bovine. In these advanced days of patent foods you buy concentrated wet nurse—in such pretty tins. And I spent six weeks at the seaside instead of going to Switzerland as usual. Oh! those long fancy-work mornings—of niggers, and revivalists, and small pebbles working in at the heels of your shoes."

"I enjoyed it," Dandie said soberly. "Do you remember that little girl with yellow curls?"

"And a chronic wet nose — yes."

"She had such nice straight legs," he went on dreamily. "How delightful it will be when Harriott is that age."

When they reached their flat Ann was already there.

"I thought I might as well come to lunch," she said coolly. "Here is a letter from Mr. Bundie; do open it, Daniel."

The flat seemed to palpitate with a continual peevish moan.

"What a cross-grained little monster your baby is, Harriott!" Ann continued, as she kissed her friend. Her vivacious face twisted into the expression of exaggerated contempt for children affected by the single woman over thirty.

Harriott shrugged, as she turned to the glass and carefully skinned her pale face of a veil.

"The poor little thing is no doubt cutting teeth," Dandie explained with an air of dignified reproach. "I will go in and have a look at her."

"Now stay where you are." Ann tugged at his sleeve. "I am dying to know what is in that letter, and so is Harriott. It may mean that you will have to go to South America."

Harriott turned quickly from the glass and stood in an attitude of attention, with her webby black veil hanging from her fingers and the black-headed pins that had bound her hat to her head stuck between her lips.

Dandie had a big stake in Buenos Ayres. She watched him open the letter. She went and peeped over his shoulder to see what his lawyer advised. The

swift thought came to her that this letter might mean emancipation. For more than eighteen months she had been drawing into her lungs an atmosphere of milk and violet powder; she was nauseated with it. A baby was the nastiest and most helpless thing alive. A good nurse would relieve her; when she came back from America her child would be an individual, with the restraints and niceties of an individual. There would be no need to hurry back.

Ann was reading over Dandie's shoulder, too.

"You must go at once," she said excitedly. "Tell him he must go at once, Harriott. There is a wretched impostor—a Spaniard—who claims everything. If we leave it to lawyers the estate will be eaten up in costs. You know what Mr. Bundie has told us about the corruption of the courts out there. You have my interests to think of as well as your own, Daniel. Half of the money is mine; it was left in equal shares to our fathers."

"I must think of the interests of my daughter, too," he said weightily.

Harriott's loose mouth twitched. His persistent importance with regard to the child—all dribble and whine—amused her. She felt a gentle, fond contempt for him.

"You must go, Dandie dear," she said, furtively fondling his hand. "You must go at once."

He turned to her with relief.

"You really think so?"

"Of course I do. It will only take a week to make arrangements. Ann will help me, I am sure."

She was thinking of a high-class registry office, or a carefully worded advertisement in a morning paper.

"Yes. Ann must look after you and the child when I am gone," he said.

Harriott nearly reeled. Her fingers, which had been stroking the back of his hand with the velvety, caressing movement of a cat's sheathed paw, turned cold and heavy. Her face was desperate and aged, like a face under sentence.

"But I am coming, too," she faltered.

"You! Impossible! We cannot take a baby on a voyage like that."

"We should leave her at home. A thorough nurse —"

"You surprise me," he interrupted in a sterner voice than she had ever heard from him. "A mother's place is with her child. I should never dream of taking you."

After lunch he had it in as usual, while the two servants dined. He tossed and jogged it, looking as ludicrous as only a devoted father can. The women watched him with curling lips. Ann's eyes shone with an odd expression under her drooped lids, as she lolled her head back with the old graceful, affected air.

"It seems a little backward," she said at last, "but I know nothing of the creatures. It is so bald — there is something uncanny, something sinister, about a bald head, when it is so big and soft-looking. You feel that you ought to stick pins into it."

"I think they are all pretty much the same. My aunt told me the first hair would come off," returned Harriott in a voice of apathy.

She was crouching over the grate, which was still filled with summer frippery. Her desperate blue eyes

never left Dandie's face, as he foolishly expanded and contracted it for the baby's benefit.

"The first hair — yes. But surely it is time it grew a second crop."

There was an awkward pause. Dandie looked at his child critically.

"I am certain it is rather backward," repeated Ann, staring at the heavy head, fat cheeks, and half-buried eyes. "Doesn't it walk, Harriott?"

"I believe not," she returned listlessly, "but there is plenty of time. Here is nurse, Dandie. Does the baby begin to walk, nurse?"

"No, ma'am. But it does not do to put a fat child on its legs too soon."

The woman threw a quick, suspicious glance from her mistress to her master.

Ann looked disgusted and Dandie gratified.

"When I come back," he said, watching the child carried out of the room, "she will be running about and chattering."

"You won't be gone so long as that," Harriott cried, with a quick spasm of her throbbing heart.

"Pooh! They soon pick it up," said Ann, with a gesture of weariness. "Now get your book, Harriott, and I'll show you how to find the places."

* * * * *

It was the last day. Harriott was on her knees packing, and Dandie was watching her affectionately from the edge of the bed where he was sitting. She talked incessantly, jumping up at intervals and kissing him with rough, desperate affection.

"You won't take these socks: there is a thin place in

the heel. When socks want mending it is time to throw them away." She tossed them on to a heap of rejected garments in the corner, with a recklessness which would have provoked her Aunt Megson to a commentary on Brixton methods.

It was the last night. She did not sleep. She heard all the sounds of night; heard a drunken wretch hoot out, heard the nurse through the wall prepare the baby's food, with a striking of matches and the tinkle of a tin sauce-pan.

It was the last morning. How sick she felt as Dandie gobbled a hasty breakfast and sent down word to the hall porter to whistle for a cab! If it had been a hearse Harriott would not have awaited it with a more miserably sick heart. She drove to the station with him in a dream; he would not let her come to Southampton to the ship, because the baby might want her. He gave her the last kiss, the last solemn mandate.

"Look after the child."

It was his creed.

She watched the tail of the train whisk out, and experienced a sense of utter, helpless bereavement. She hailed a hansom and drove from Waterloo Station with her veil down and her throat thick, as she would have driven from a churchyard. She told the man to take her to her club in Bond Street. She could not stand the flat, all untidy with departure — not yet.

Mrs. Ellis, the elegant, fair-haired, exquisitely dressed member, was lunching at a table which seemed to hold jars of loose chrysanthemums and very little else. A child was with her, a little girl, dressed with grotesque

daintiness in a brocade coat nearly touching the ground and a brocade cap sewn with pearls.

"I had to bring the child—such a nuisance!" said the mother to Harriott. "Her nurse has gone. Tiresome creature; she has taken a holiday, or, rather, she has gone to bury her father; the result is the same to me. What will you have, Mona,—some milk and one of those nice big buns?"

It was a lovely little girl. Mrs. Ellis, for all her affected heartlessness, threw it a full, expressive look now and then. Harriott, as she ate thick soup, was thinking that when a baby grew to that age it was endurable. She would dress her child like that in a year or two.

"How old is she?" she asked, looking admiringly at the rings of brown hair escaping from the cap and at the exquisite eyes and colouring.

"Mona? She is just two," said Mrs. Ellis, carelessly.

Harriott started. She felt her lips grow stiff and dry as she said:—

"Only two years? What a lot of hair!"

"It is rather short, but a pretty colour and very thick."

"And she can walk?"

"Of course she can, and talk too. Didn't she talk last night! Naughty girl! Nurse gives her two biscuits to put in a basket when she goes to bed. The woman spoils her. Last night, just because I had to look after her, the little wretch woke up at the very coldest, darkest hour, crying for more. You should have heard her! She kept on: 'Want annuner bikky putten in er bartik!'"

She laughed and added:—

"Dick wanted to get her one—you know how soft men are—but I said, 'No, let her shout, the tiresome little animal.' And she did, until she fell down in a heap on the cot, fast asleep and worn out. You can see how red her eyes are; just because I had to bring her to the club and wanted her to look nice. Dick got out and rolled her up in the eider-down."

The child made a big bite at the bun. Harriott saw little square, strong teeth in even rows.

She took a flesh-coloured, ragged flower from one of the jars, twirled it in her fingers, then stuck it back and gave a nervous, silly laugh.

"What a lot of teeth!" she said faintly; "it must be a very forward child."

Mrs. Ellis looked at her curiously.

"Oh, no; at this age they always have teeth. My children are never phenomenal. Now, my sister-in-law's babies run when they are a year old—at least she says so. This one was fifteen months."

"Is fifteen months late?"

"Yes, I suppose it is." She looked faintly weary of the subject. "Why, you ought to know; your baby must be nearly as old as this, and I am sure," she gave a charming, sneering laugh, "it ought to be a very fine one, for Miss Chance says you are a perfect slave to it."

"Yes, it is a very fat baby," Harriott said mechanically.

She found her umbrella and got up.

"You are not off yet? I should be so grateful if you would drive with me to a shop near the Marble Arch, and stay with the child while I get out to look at some cretonnes. Do! it would be a charity."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot stay to-day. I am not in the mood for shopping — or for anything. My husband started for South America this morning. He may be away for months."

"Dear me! Most women would be charmed at the opportunity," cried Mrs. Ellis, with a fashionable air of depravity; "but you are so odd. By the way, bring your little one — it's a girl, isn't it? — to the club some day, and we will compare notes. How old is it?"

"Twenty months."

"Well, a few months do not make much difference. The two ought to be chums. I think small children are so funny together."

As Harriott drove home to Oxford Street she was more miserable than ever. Her pride was touched. Why was not her child lovely and intelligent too?

For a wonder it was not whining when she let herself into the flat. The silence seemed strange. She had grown used to that doleful, persistent plaint like a miller to the mill-clack. She went stealthily along the passage for fear of waking it. She went into the dining-room, where Dandie's discarded old slippers lurked half under the sofa.

The dining-room and the drawing-room were only divided off by a screen of Japanese embroidery. She and Dandie had bought it with other things on the memorable intoxicating day when they went furnishing.

She sat down by the window, her sad eyes on the shabby patent slippers with the frayed bows.

The flat was certainly very quiet, and the fire, which usually burnt so brightly, was grey. She half rose to ring the bell for more coal, when she heard a voice, and

instinctively slipped back on to the chair. It was the voice of the charwoman. She was the hall porter's wife. They lived in the bowels of the building, with a horde of small children who were seldom seen. She came up every morning to help with the housework.

"Well, I must get downstairs and look after my children's tea. They take their dinner to school, but it's only a bit o' something cold, and they're fit to eat you when they come home in the afternoons. Such hearty little things!"

The cook replied, with a delightful air of hospitality:

"Oh, don't hurry, Mrs. Slimper. The kettle's just on the boil and I'll make you an early cup."

The nurse added:—

"I suppose I ought to go to the Park; it's past four, but there's no fear of her coming in."

Harriott began to feel indignant. She half rose again, meaning to appear round the screen and rout them all three. But again the instinct which she did not pretend to account for forced her back, still and hardly breathing, to the chair to wait.

"Her! She won't hurry in now he's gone. She'll live at her club, as she calls it," cried the cook, with a sniff of undisguised contempt.

"It's queer, ain't it, the tricks these ladies get up to?" said Mrs. Slimper, in a tone of displeasure, evidently classing Harriott's taste for the club with a taste for strong drink. "My husband, he always says that if he had a wife like that he'd give her what for."

They all laughed, and then the nurse said in a graver voice:—

"To tell you the truth, I don't half like taking this kid out."

"Blest if I should," feelingly echoed her fellow-servant.

"People pass such remarks. A poor little object! Ah! money ain't everything."

"No, that it ain't." The charwoman was speaking now, and Harriott was growing rapidly stiff and white with an awful foreboding.

"Why," the woman went on, "look at my little Gwen-dolen. She's ever so much younger than this, and see how she runs about and the mischief she gets into. A young maggot! I daren't leave her with a box of matches or a boiling kettle, she's that sharp and knowing."

"This one wouldn't have the sense to burn itself," the nurse said scathingly.

"And there's my little nephew," the cook broke in, and Harriott knew by the comfortable, lazy voice that she was lolling on the blue sofa with her arms folded; "he's three months younger—and *talks*. You should just hear him talk! Every man he meets, he calls out, 'Dad, dad!' My sister Jane says it's so awkward, you don't know where to look."

"They'll never rear this one," the charwoman prophesied. "How many teeth has the poor little mite got? Her mouth looks empty."

"Only one, and another's been trying to come through for months. And just look at its stomach! Did you ever see a child such a size in all your born days?"

There was a rumple of starched cambric. They were evidently baring it.

Harriott sat rigid and angular on the chair by the window. Her face was like an oval mask of yellowish wax, hollowed at the cheeks and patched by two bits of dull enamel for eyes. She was swept by one strong feeling—one only. It was relief, intense, bounding relief—that Dandie had gone, that Dandie did not know, need not know yet—need never know. Who could say? The charwoman's words were ringing queerly in her head, chiming musically, like a carillon which she had heard in Brussels when she was on her honeymoon.

"They'll never rear this one—they'll never rear this one." These women who had so many children knew everything—they were sibyls. It might die. If it would only die and she could shut it away, and with it the memory of all its imperfections, all the things that it lacked—speech, sense, teeth—and Dandie never know! Then she shivered as she sat upright beneath the window, opposite the grey grate and staring blankly at the dear shabby slippers. The very strength and potency of that thought made her shiver. If it would only die! If it would only gain sense enough to arrive at that solution!

"Don't they ever seem to notice?"

"No. He's so fond of it and she's so wrapt up in herself."

Harriott winced. Yes, that was the secret. Dandie was so devoted and she so unheeding. Then her burning brain went over the same ground. Well, after all, it was fortunate: things were working out for the best. He did not know—he had gone away just in time. In all probability he would never know. These women

who did nothing but bear children were always right — it would not live. A life like that must surely hang on the very thinnest of threads. The thread, so thin, must be broken if necessary. It was absurdly easy! A little neglect — the wrong food, a north-east wind — anything. The child came between her and Dandie. Nothing must be permitted to do that. If it died, the old careless, caressing days would come back. She would persuade Dandie that children were a mistake — he would see that for himself. He would be content to have only her, as she was fully content to have only him. It must not live.

She nearly groaned aloud, conscious all at once that she was thinking the thoughts of a murderess. But the thought, the wish, had been lying dormant in her brain for many months. Now that it suddenly took shape, she was frightened and guilty, as if she had already carried that insinuating thought into practice.

"Money ain't everything — you're right there," said the charwoman, harking back. "But it helps. Good Lord, how it helps! It 'ud be worse for a poor person to have an idiot. What a handful for a working woman! And you can't get 'em into the asylum — they're always full up."

They were slowly driving Harriott mad. That cruel word "idiot" made everything final. She was fiercely angry and ashamed. Her child was an idiot! All sorts of desperate, guilty plans chased through her racking head. She stumbled up, fell on her knees by the grate and raked the cinders savagely, as if they were enemies. Then she heard a soft scuttling on the other side of the screen and presently the nurse came in.

"The weather looked so uncertain that I was afraid to go out, ma'am. It's an east wind," she said respectfully. "But I carried baby into the drawing-room and held her up to the window to see the horses go by."

"The weather is beautiful," returned Harriott, curtly. "Get her dressed and I will take her out myself."

She swept by the woman and went into the drawing-room. The child was squatting on the floor, unusually quiet—its silence was more hopeless, more dreadful, than its cry. It stared at her wearily, as she stood, radiant in her bright autumn clothes and wrapped to her chin in golden fur. It looked utterly weary of the world, it seemed passively waiting to go—like a very aged woman.

She had never thought the look peculiar before—she had never troubled herself about the matter, babies being so very tiresome and uninteresting. But now, as she thought of Mrs. Ellis's lovely girl, the truth beat in on her. It hurt so intensely: it was like a blacksmith's hammer at her brain.

The nurse came back with the velvet pelisse and bonnet.

"Shall Slimper get a hansom, ma'am?"

"No, thank you."

"Do you want the 'pram' brought up from the basement?"

"No; be as quick as you can, please. It will soon be dark."

The woman kept stealing furtive glances of unbounded amazement at her mistress, who had never taken the child out of the flat before, and whose eyes were so wild and glassy behind her carefully arranged veil.

"You will want me to come too, ma'am, of course?"

"No; I will go alone. Is she ready?"

Harriott took the baby on her arm awkwardly. It was so lumpish that it weighed her down. The nurse watched her downstairs; when it was safe, the other servant stole from the kitchen and watched, too. Directly she was out of sight, they looked at each other queerly, and they both said, at the same moment, —

"You don't think she heard?"

Slimper, the porter, was gorgeous in chocolate and Lincoln green at the portal. Harriott waved him off.

"I am going to walk," she said, moving briskly away.

Oxford Street was very gay and crowded. Every one stared. This elegant, white-faced woman with the extraordinary baby on her arm was unusual. She walked on to Tottenham Court Road as if she had not completely made up her mind. Once she half turned back. But when she reached the corner, she got into a yellow omnibus that was going to Victoria, instinctively reverting to the economic method of her maiden days.

Mrs. Megson's amazement when she opened the front door was unbounded. She had answered the bell herself, as she did sometimes from pure habit, dating back to the days when she had kept but one small servant, whose afternoons were spent in cleaning herself.

"You have fallen out with Daniel?" she asked apprehensively.

"No. What made you think that?"

Harriott spoke with forced lightness. She stood lopsided on the step, one hip and shoulder dragged down by her burden. Her hat was flat on her head, one shoe was untied, and a button had burst from her glove.

"Well, come in, now you are here," Mrs. Megson said none too graciously, as her niece hesitated on the step.

When they were in the warm dining-room, with the door shut, she added, with pathetic bitterness, —

"There must be something up, or you would not come to see me and bring the baby."

Harriott put the passive child on the sofa and looked round her. The tremendous gasalier, the table and chairs, the strip of linoleum, — laid to save the carpet from the door to the sideboard, — the plushette hangings at the fireplace, were all familiar. She had often been very happy in this room. Dandie had played cards on that tapestry table-cloth.

Mrs. Megson was looking at her set face anxiously.

"I am sure you are keeping something back," she said sharply. "We cannot take you in, remember, after the shabby way you have behaved. Daniel must make proper provision if you can't get on together."

"Dandie is on his way to South America," Harriott said. "He has gone to look after his money. That is all. There never was a better husband than Dandie."

"Well, I am very glad to see you if everything is all right," Mrs. Megson said, after a moment's deliberation, and giving one of her big, puffing gulps of relief. "But you must not stay until your uncle comes home. He won't hear your name mentioned — you have treated us so badly. A man with his position in the City does not like to be slighted by a whipper-snapper like Daniel. It has caused many a bitter word between us, Harriott. I've been more than a mother to you."

"I am very sorry, Aunt," she said coldly, and piling

all the blame on Dandie, "but when a woman marries, she must please her husband."

"Ah! I have said all along that it was Daniel," cried Mrs. Megson, much mollified. "Now let me have a good look at the baby. I haven't seen it since it was six weeks old, and you didn't even answer my letters, although I was run off my legs when you were expecting your confinement."

Harriott watched her face intently as she took the child on her knee and removed the bonnet from the bald head.

"Why," cried Mrs. Megson, in an odd voice, "it has no hair! And oh, my dear," as the mouth opened and a slow stream of saliva dribbled out, "no teeth! What is wrong with it?"

"That is what I came to ask you. The servants call it an idiot. It doesn't walk or even crawl. They crawl first, do they not? Is there any reason why my child should be an idiot?"

Harriott's voice was crisp and cold.

The maid came in to get tea ready. They impatiently watched her spread the white embroidered cloth cornerwise on the big, square table. She seemed to drone over the simple task.

"Toast one of those Sally Lunn's," Mrs. Megson said mechanically.

When they had the room to themselves again, she said, shaking her head, "I was half afraid of it."

"Of what?"

The door opened again, and the maid set the tray on the table.

"And a breakfast cup of bread and milk, Caroline," Mrs. Megson said.

They were alone again, and would be for some minutes. The Sally Lunn and bread and milk would take time. Mrs. Megson got up, putting the child back on the sofa, where it sat silent, like an unwieldy, misshapen god.

She kissed her niece quite passionately. It was the worst thing she could have done: her affection had always irritated Harriott and roused in her that strange dislike and lack of sympathy. She drew her cheek quickly from those thin lips, with the hatefully palpable false teeth.

"Well?" she said frigidly.

The final instalment of the tea came in. Mrs. Megson sat down and poured it out in a flurry. She felt more dignified behind the tray. Harriott's air of shrinking had not been lost on her.

"The bread and milk is nice and sweet," she said, as she tasted it with a smack of her lips, and slid the cup along the table. "Will you take her on your lap? She is old enough to be tied in a chair, but she is so backward."

Harriott picked the baby from the sofa, and began to spoon the food from the cup to the eager mouth—it was always hungry. But when she slopped a spoonful on to her own gown she chinked the spoon into the saucer pettishly.

"I cannot do it. Nurse always feeds her," she cried, falling back in her chair.

Mrs. Megson took the child, first spreading a serviette on her lap. She shot a contemptuous look at her niece. As the poor little thing was afflicted, it was Harriott's duty to love it all the more.

"Have some tea-cake while it is hot," she said, with her perennial hospitality; "though it does not look to me toasted through. That is the worst of girls."

She seemed eager to keep on the commonplace, but Harriott, sitting bolt upright, and very pale, repeated, in her clear, icy voice, "Well?"

"My dear, do drink your tea. I am sure you must want it—such a tiresome journey."

"I only want to know why my child is an idiot."

"But you are not sure." Mrs. Megson looked hopelessly at it. "So many children are backward. Take her to a good doctor—one of those West-end physicians: it is wonderful the things they do nowadays."

"Was my father an idiot?"

Mrs. Megson started and flushed. She was gobbling buttered cake, taking big bites between the spoons of bread and milk.

"Well, no—not an idiot exactly; not an idiot at all. He was a very well-educated man. They were well-off people in their time, and he had gone to college. But—"

"Well?"

The merciless voice was like a slave-lash. Mrs. Megson went on desperately:—

"My dear, he died mad, if you will have the truth. It was in the blood."

"In the blood?" echoed Harriott, faintly.

Every bit of colour instantly left her face. She looked absolutely bleached—a woman of paper, paper discoloured by years of age and folding. Her emotion irritated Mrs. Megson, whose nerves were quivering.

"Don't look like that," she cried sharply. "It was

a delicate family — that is all. Delicacy runs in some families: babies with rickets, girls going into consumption when they reach their teens. Even Heber — that was your father — had epileptic fits as a very young man; at least, so Mrs. Gatley gave me to understand. She was an old family servant."

"And he died in an asylum?"

Harriott's voice was clear and incisive as she made the hazard, like the business-like voice of an interviewer, anxious for telling points.

"Oh, dear, no," stammered Mrs. Megson, to whom the figure with the cut throat lying on a damp stone floor had suddenly become once more a real and terrifying object.

She was saying to herself that wild horses should not drag the truth out of her. Harriott should be spared that. She should never know that she had a suicide father. She was fond of Harriott. How could you help being fond of a girl that you had brought up by hand from birth? Even ingratitude, and a singularly callous disposition, could not utterly wipe out that memory.

"But they were all queer," she added helplessly; "don't let it worry you. Children have nine lives, I'm sure. You must take her to a physician — you have the money — though, if she belonged to me, I should go to the hospital. It is to their interest at the hospitals to get rid of you as soon as possible."

She was working herself up to her usual voluble pitch. She spooned the food into the greedy child's mouth carelessly, as she gabbled out by degrees the pleasant family history of the decadent Wickens. Harriott sat white

and sharp by the loaded tea-table, listening — listening so intently ; every word a drop of burning lead. Mrs. Megson warmed to her subject. Harriott seemed to know all those unfortunates — dead, diseased, guilty, mad. There was not a normal one in the whole family. There were clever ones — men and women with freakish talents — but not one healthy, comfortable, common person, of the sort that makes life slip smoothly along.

“And your father drank,” Mrs. Megson wound up — “at least, so this old woman said. I never believe more than half I hear.”

“Go on,” said Harriott. A rash-like flush began to burn on her yellow cheeks. “Go on,” she repeated breathlessly.

“There is nothing more to say. I’ve forgotten a great deal. What a poor tea you are making !”

It was quickly getting dark. One by one lights glowed in the windows of the houses across the way and hands drew down blinds to shut out the night. A muffin-man came tinkling down the Gardens in the deepening grey. From the kitchen, which was on the ground floor, came a savoury sizzling of steak and onions. Mrs. Megson, vaguely searching for comfort and peace of mind, turned to the fire, pulling up her black silk skirt until she showed her striped petticoat, and cuddling the child, who began to whimper, to her big, palpitating bust.

“Draw up your chair,” she called out to her niece through the red light of the glowing coals. “Nursing this child reminds me of the time when I nursed you. Poor Rosalie ! I shall always remember her lying dead in that wretched bedroom — you were born in the coun-

try. I never saw a corpse with such a queer look on its face. It seemed as if she had died with something horrible on her mind. I've always said that if she had lived until we got down from Kennington she might have told me far worse things than the old woman did. Marriage is such a lottery."

The door opened, and the housemaid asked if she might lay the cloth for Mr. Megson's late dinner.

"In five minutes, Caroline." Mrs. Megson rustled up in a fluster and dumped the child on its mother's knee. Then she rattled down the Venetian blinds, found the matches, and flared up the gas.

"You must go at once—I'd no idea it was so late," she said nervously. "There would be unpleasantness if your uncle found you here. It is your own fault that I have to turn you out. Get the baby dressed. Is that him coming down the Gardens?"

She listened, then said with relief:—

"No, that is not his step. It's Mr. Girling, at No. 24. But they generally come by the same train."

Harriott was fastening the velvet pelisse. She pulled the velvet bonnet over the ball-like head, she buttoned up the gaiters.

"See," she said, sticking out a passive leg for inspection, with a curious gesture of shame, helplessness, and distaste, "they are crooked."

Mrs. Megson looked terrified, as if this child—this extraordinary product masquerading as a baby—had been a ghost. It was so balefully like the Wickens—Mrs. Gatley had shown her many photographs.

Harriott stood up, straight and white. An odd change had, little by little, throughout the narrative, transfigured

her. She jerked her burden up to the easiest place on her arm, tucking her hands under the child's clothes, and keeping her head stiffly back, to avoid contact with Mrs. Megson's mouth.

"Good-by," she said, in a voice of exasperating insolence; "we shall not meet again. I have done with you. I will never forgive you — never, never: because, knowing all these horrors, you let me marry Dandie. I blame you for this," — she touched the child with a gesture of repugnance, — "it was wicked; people like you ought to be punished by law. I should like to see you sent to prison. You have ruined my life and Dandie's life. You let me bring this into the world. It is worse than murder — because murder ends a thing, and this" — she touched the stolid child again — "only begins. I am only beginning. What shall I say to Dandie when he comes home? What will he say to me? Unless it dies —"

Mrs. Megson interrupted her. She was horrified, scandalised, and enraged.

"You wicked, unnatural girl," she gasped, "not to love your own child! You must be half a devil — Mr. Megson always said so. Murder! Prison!" Her voice grew shriller and her face more blackly purple. "How dare you use such words to me, after all I have done?"

"After all you have done? Yes." Harriott gave her unpleasant laugh and nodded her untidy head, on which the fashionable hat toppled tipsily. "After all you have done!"

Mrs. Megson swept past her into the hall, making the hat-stand palpitate in her heavy progress.

"Get out of the house before your uncle comes into

it!" she cried out shrilly, in the familiar, mouthing way of which Harriott had so many sick and ashamed memories.

Harriott's white, ineffably scornful face maddened her. She banged the street-door well back, regardless of servants and neighbours.

They looked at each other with defiant eyes for a moment — the last look. They had always been antagonistic, as blood relations sometimes unaccountably are. Mrs. Megson had the temper of a vixen when she was roused. And Harriott had not behaved well. This was not the first quarrel by many. On the elder woman's side it always degenerated into a street row. This was the climax. They would never quarrel again.

"Now go!" said Mrs. Megson. She made a sweeping movement with her arms as if she were holding a broom with which to brush the step.

Harriott went. She hoisted the child painfully now and then as she dragged herself down Gammeridge Gardens. She was trembling violently. It had been so humiliating; it would leave its mark on her. And she was alone. The only one who even half understood her had gone. Dandie on his way to South America might just as well have been Dandie dead, for all he could do for her on this awful day of revelation.

CHAPTER VIII

HARRIOTT was writing her weekly letter to Dandie. She was going through the weekly ordeal that she had gone through unwaveringly ever since the day when she carried the child to Brixton. Her pen flew over the flimsy paper. She told him about the club, the servants, her new gowns, new ornaments that she had bought for the flat, trivialities that she knew would not interest him. He would skim it all until he came to this part about the child! It was her weekly torture.

She threw the pen down despairingly and let her face slip into her curved hands. After a little she lifted it and began to write again with hard, blurred strokes and leaning letters.

"She runs like a little hare. Nurse says so—no doubt she has seen a hare run; I haven't. We have to be so careful to keep the outer door of the flat shut. And she talks. Did I tell you? I believe I did. She woke up in the night and kept crying out for biscuits. 'Want annuner bikky putten in er bartik.'"

She let the pen fall, saying, with a bitter twist of her mouth, that it was enough for that week. Then she added a postscript.

"Ann has been to Leeds for a long time, but is back now. Baby and I have had a lovely month in the country—chuntry *she* calls it, 'pitty clean chuntry.' Ann returned to London two days before we did.

She couldn't think what in the world had become of me."

She sealed the letter. She felt miserably certain that she had told him those things before. These infantile anecdotes were very confusing. She ought to keep a note-book — but then she had never been methodical. It would not do to repeat oneself, he would be suspicious. She had barely sealed the letter when Ann came in.

She came very often with the frequency and suddenness of a spy. She and Harriott were not such good friends as they had been. A dead wall had risen up between them. Their kisses and endearing words were hollow. One had something to hide and the other suspected it.

"Been writing to Dandie?" she said lightly. "Have you heard lately? When is he coming home?"

"Oh! not yet for a long time," Harriott laughed, "though he says he means to surprise me some day. I am in no hurry. Freedom is very fascinating."

She had picked up the slang of the club. Most of the married members were very fond of their husbands, but would have resigned rather than admit it.

Ann laughed too.

"Ah! You are finding that out. It is why I never married. By the way, what are you doing to-day? I thought we might go shopping."

"I am not in the mood to shop. You must excuse me, please. I want to finish a novel so as to change to-morrow. And then Baby will be in presently."

"You seem very devoted to the baby." Ann rose in a pet, sweeping a comprehensive glance about her, as if the key to Harriott's secret might be lurking in a corner. "How is it I never see the creature?"

"You are never here at the right time."

"I am here at all times."

"She goes out a great deal."

"Is she out now?"

"Yes. If you go through Hyde Park you may see her. It is a white perambulator, and I told the maid to keep near the Marble Arch," said Harriott, with a laboured attempt at ease.

"Do come with me. It is a lovely afternoon. You must want to see the shops. I hope you haven't come back with dowdy rustic instincts."

"I must finish the novel."

Ann hesitated as she stood in the middle of the room, such a daintily finished creature, with her head indolently back, and her beautiful throat bared a little more than was customary. She looked at Harriott searchingly.

"Well," she said at last, with an offensive, husband's relations air of authority, "I promised Daniel I'd look after you and the child. May I come in to-morrow? I have bought her a little pinafore and want to try it on."

"That is very good of you, but to-morrow I am going out all day."

"And to-day you are such a devoted mother that you cannot go out at all. I shall not want *you*. The nurse and I will manage the fit between us."

"Better not. Nurse is such a strange, touchy woman. I think I shall have to get rid of her. Come on Wednesday—that will be in four days' time. I should like to show you the child myself. She has improved so much."

"Very well, on Wednesday. Good-by! I won't keep you from your novel. I don't see it, by the way."

Harriott flinched a little before the searching eyes. She went out with Ann to the staircase and put her head over the bannisters and listened.

"Is that nurse?" she said nervously. "Doesn't it sound to you as if Slimper were taking the perambulator down to the basement?"

"I hear nothing. You don't look quite up to the mark. Good-by. Wednesday, then."

Harriott watched her go gracefully down the long stone flights, and then went back to her little crowded drawing-room, all blue brocade, gilding, and toys from the Oriental shops. She sank down on the sofa, with its nests of yielding cushions. Her colourless face was desperate. She was at bay. Wednesday! Wednesday! Only four days. What should she do? There was no one in the world to help her. She knew instinctively that Ann was her enemy. What could she do to circumvent Ann and so save herself and Dandie? Then all at once she thought of Owen, who had been so fond of her in Brixton days. Owen would help her.

She ran into her bedroom and dressed herself as smartly as she could, tying a veil over her face and pulling her light hair forward to make a becoming frame. She must look nice. Men were so swayed by things of that sort.

It was strange to be standing at the top of those steep, white steps leading to the house in the main road; to lift the iron knocker and wait under the red lamp, which seemed like a tremendous inflamed eye. The bay windows each side of her were scrupulously curtained, there was a light in the left-hand one—it used to be the dining-room.

She was shown into a little waiting-room at the back. Owen had made a success of life; the whole house was gently assertive of a good practice. She looked about her for some clue, something that would tell her of the changes that must have come to him during the years that had gone. But there was only a rug of waste silk on the couch. He had always been fond of bright colours. The maid came back and bade her follow. As they went through the hall, with its well-rubbed slippery linoleum, she saw a mackintosh hanging limply on the hat-stand. It was only then she remembered that he had married Polly—on her recommendation. It was a new mackintosh, but it made her think of the eligible Government clerk who had been lost by one.

They were all sitting at tea. The room was comfortable, with a red winking fire and a heavily spread table. Owen had come in from his rounds and had put on his slippers. The wind outside was a little boisterous and the pavements, although the night was May, shockingly greasy. These things add to one's appreciation of a comfortable home; it was thoughtful of Polly to have a fire—after the spring clean, too. He was satisfied with himself, with his wife and his three hearty children. And then came the thunder of the knocker and the maid announcing Mrs. Darnell. He was angry with her. Why had she come? He had grown fat and satisfied; he had forgotten. Polly said she must be shown in and have some tea!

She stood on the threshold for a moment, taking in the scene thoughtfully. She was provokingly young and elegant. Polly resented it at once. Then she got up carefully from her chair and kissed her old friend,

and began to say in a grating, loudly hospitable voice — just in the style of Mrs. Megson — what a surprise it was, and that she must take off her things and spend the evening.

Owen shook hands with her; he made an effort to be cold and distant, but directly she looked at him through the confusing mesh of the veil, the old wistful, half-humble look crept into his eyes and melted all the strangeness they might have felt after such an interval and such changes. Her heart beat more quickly when she saw that look. He was still her slave, although he did not know it. He would pull her through. She sat down, and carefully took off her gloves, showing delicate hands. He hardly recognised in this self-possessed woman, whose toilette lacked not one of the whims of the season, the rather loose and untidy girl with the bitter tongue who had lived with the Megsons.

The children were staring at her, with their infant mouths wide open and their squabs of bread and jam tight in their fists. Polly was looking, too, wondering if sleeves ought really to be such an odd shape, and if Miss Cramp, the Brixton dressmaker, would be able to make a bodice just like that if it were accurately described to her. She looked at every fold; she must manage to carry it in her head. And then she rang for more tea and more toast, and, after much pressing, Harriott began to eat.

These people were so kind. Why had she always found the mode of life so insufferable! Polly kept getting things from the sideboard — special biscuits, a tin of potted chicken. She suggested boiled eggs and regretted that she had no cream to put in the tea. It was

all very homely and comfortable, but a week of it would have killed her.

The cheap glass dishes full of jam on the table gave an indisputable stamp of commonplace. You could sort people by a thing like that: those who always had jam for tea and those who never did. Suppose she had married Owen instead of marrying Dandie! Was it possible that she could ever have settled down to a life like this; would she have become broken in to high tea and the local dressmaker? She looked at Polly's smart afternoon bodice with amusement. As for the children, they appeared coarse little animals. But what big children!

"This one," said Polly, watching her and touching a straight black head, "is two days older than your eldest. How many have you?"

"Only that one. I wanted"—she turned to Owen—"to consult you about it."

"To consult Owen!"—Polly became shrill and suspicious. "Why, there must be plenty of doctors in London! You live in the West-end, don't you? Fancy coming to Brixton for medical advice! I call that stupid."

"Anything I can do," began Owen, throwing a glance of displeasure at his wife—this was not like her usual tact with patients. Then he added, "How old?"

"As old as Margaret, of course," put in Polly, who would not be suppressed.

"As old as Margaret—yes. Is it seriously ill? Does your own medical adviser—"

"Not so many questions—not now," she said pleadingly. "Not here." She looked comprehensively at

Polly and the children. "When you have finished your tea. Well, what I really came to ask you to do was to come and see it. Can you come to-night?"

"Right up to the West!"—Polly's thin mouth was dangerous. "You would not dream of it to-night, Owen. And, besides, Mamma may drop in to supper. She so often does on Saturdays."

Harriott was putting on her gloves again, her meal had been of the very slightest.

"I thought you would not mind," she said, looking full at Owen and ignoring his wife; "we are such old friends."

He got up from his chair, wiping his mouth as he did it and stooping back to the table to drink the dregs of his big cup of tea. He had grown very stout and middle-aged; while as for Polly, she looked forty.

"I think I can manage it," he said, speaking in a conciliatory tone to his sulky-faced wife. "I will make arrangements. Fortunately, it is not dispensary night, and I will leave a message for any patients who are likely to call."

He hurried out of the room before Polly could protest. She relieved herself by smacking the hands of the youngest child, who sat in a high chair with a mackintosh napkin spread on the table in front of it.

"Naughty! naughty! You must not drink when your mouth is full. Granville, why don't you look after your little sister?"

Then she began to talk to Harriott, putting leading questions as only the women of the Megson type can.

"And only one child, and that delicate! Well, we have three—almost four"—she laughed consciously

— “as strong as little horses, though Margaret was troubled with ringworm a time back. But they pick these things up, don’t they? And you live in a flat still? I like to have a house of my own. I must come and see you. Of course you have an afternoon. But it won’t be yet” — she laughed again, the full laugh of a woman who is conscious of doing her duty, and then lowered her voice as she added, “not until after August. Owen has such a splendid practice — among the best people. We visit some; they are so stiff; give grand ‘At homes’ — you know the kind of people. I have to go, but I call it stupid, don’t you? A doctor’s wife has to be so careful to do the right thing. Of course, with you it doesn’t matter, does it? And the ways of society are always changing. I have a book on etiquette; it is so useful.”

Harriott said very little. She was painfully waiting for Owen to come back. Once when Margaret clapped her small hands and made some comic baby speech, she looked at the child attentively and seemed to repeat the words to herself, as if she were storing them up.

Polly saw the look. She called the two elder children to her — the baby was asleep in a cradle by the fire — and wiped their mouths and fingers with a spotty table napkin that evidently did general service.

“Margaret, can you say, ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’?” she asked persuasively.

The child clenched her dumpy hands tightly behind her print pinafore. She was a sharp, black-haired little thing, with Polly’s assertive snarl already showing on her soft, flat features.

“Prinkle, prinkle, nickle tar,” she began.

Harriott listened attentively, her eyes very big and grave. She had the alert attitude of a woman-journalist — without her note-book and anxious not to miss a word.

"Can she say it again?" she asked breathlessly, when the child stopped.

Polly was evidently flattered. She wore the eager air of a professor with a clever troupe of performing animals.

"You must hear Granville say, 'Poor Pussy in the Well,'" she said. "Come, Granville!"

"But he is so much older."

"Only ten months, and he is backward."

"'Who put her in?'" demanded Granville, sadly. He was a fat child and already wore spectacles, like his father.

"'Nikle Kommy In. What a naughty boy was 'at! To d'own poo' pussy cat. Who never did him never harm. But kill 'e mice in daddy's barn.'"

"Very interesting, very clever." Harriott gave her foolish, quivering laugh. "May they have sixpence each?"

"To put in their missionary boxes—oh, yes," conceded Polly.

She became quite affable. She was flattered by Harriott's attitude towards the children. She had been anxious to impress her—with her children and her high position as a Brixton doctor's wife. Still, she disliked and distrusted her.

The children slipped back to the table, climbing painfully into their high chairs. They held a high carnival while their mother talked the visitor down—sticking

their fingers boldly into the jam dishes, licking off all they could, and bestowing the rest with infant lavishness on their pinafores.

When Owen came back the two women went with him into the passage.

Margaret was making a horrible din with her spoon against the edge of the tea-tray. When Owen opened the street-door they saw that it was raining.

Harriott looked out, and then she looked down at her elegant shoes and the frill of silk at the edge of her skirt.

"Hadn't your man better fetch a cab?" she said, drawing back as the rain drifted up the steps and the wind caught her veil.

"Our man!" Polly laughed unpleasantly. "We have no man. This is a private house, Harriott, not a big block of dwellings. And I couldn't think of sending one of the maids out in such weather. You can easily walk to the cabstand. Put on my mackintosh and Owen will bring it back. He does not usually go out at night except to his first-class patients, and twice a week to the dispensary — which he is thinking of giving up."

Harriott did not answer. Owen turned up his collar and opened his umbrella.

"I will go and get a cab," he said.

Just as he was going a young woman came up the steps. She was stylishly dressed, according to her lights, in a violet gown, with trimmings of flaring silk plaid and deep yellow lace. She wore a cheap black jacket, which was unbuttoned to show the silk front of her gown, and she carried a cotton umbrella to preserve a hat on which artificial flowers were heaped profusely.

She came close to the doctor, and Polly, who was fully in his confidence, looked at her disapprovingly.

"I have heard of nothing, Jenkins," he said hurriedly.

"Very well, sir."

She went down the steps again, as quickly as she had come up them. The flowers in her hat quivered as she slightly tossed her head. Owen followed her. Polly shut the door and sat down, short of breath, on one of the hall chairs.

"What is the matter with your little one?" she persisted. "I should think anything but croup might wait until the morning. And surely you have your own doctor."

"She has been very delicate from her birth — that is all," Harriott said shortly.

They did not speak after that, but Polly, from her seat on the hall chair, threw looks of curiosity and venom. Then Owen came with the cab and she said reproachfully, —

"You have not said good-by to the children."

Harriott went back to the dining-room, where the two elder ones were solemnly eating, and the baby was awake, kicking its bare legs and gurgling. She kissed Granville and Margaret gravely between the eyes or on the bridge of the nose, because their mouths were so abominably sticky, and stooped over the cradle to perform a like office for the baby, whose face was a shining lake of slobber. Then she kissed Polly, caught up her skirts, and left.

It was a four-wheeled cab. She sat on the very edge of the seat, looking out of the window at the main road, which was very busy with a Saturday-night market.

She did not speak to Owen, who had thrown himself back and was silent.

It was a long drive to Oxford Street. They went up to her flat, still not speaking. She took him into the dining-room and told him to sit down on one of the uncomfortable oak chairs, the coarse carving of which bulged out at the back and tried the sitter's shoulder-blades. He blinked about him. At the home of another patient the room would have appeared usual. Black oak and blue plates — fourpence something a plate — were slowly making their way to Brixton. His own dining-room was in light oak; still, a great many of his patients preferred black and blue. But he had never dissevered Harriott from the house in Gammeridge Gardens, where Mrs. Megson's taste had run towards coloured enamel furniture and big art pots in self-colours.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, disappearing as swiftly and silently as a phantom.

While he was waiting he heard a strange cry. Then he sat listening to the dull roll of the vehicles. Then he got up and looked out of the window, at the shabby side-street in which the block was built, and at the big thoroughfare where the omnibuses were packed and the people moved slowly like a storm-cloud. He marvelled at any one choosing to live in the middle of London. It was so much more open "a little way out."

Harriott came back. She had taken off her outdoor things. When she spoke her mouth and nostrils twitched; it reminded him of the day when the Megsons gave a garden party and he and she had sat under the limes.

"Will you come in to the child now?" she said, in a voice that tried to be natural.

He followed her. The set of her shoulders, the slight swaying of her hips, the very twisting of her abundant light hair, drew him to her again, after so many years — after Polly and the three children. He was more in love with her than ever. His time of fat, lulled peace was over. He bitterly blamed himself for allowing exaggerated physical scruples to kill love. A man was higher than the animals. He had been a crank, a medical prig. He could have won her had he wished, in spite of Dandie. He had a great belief in himself. She was healthy enough. She had developed; her eyes and skin were exquisitely clear. The mysticism and inertness which had made him distrustful in the old days had gone. An overstrained self-possession had taken their place. Perhaps, after all, it was only another form of artificiality.

She threw open a door. It was a nursery. There were toys on the floor and a high chair — a complicated thing, that would rock and wheel and wind to various heights. At the very threshold he heard the cry again.

She turned her head and looked at him. Her face was ashy, but she went on. He followed. As they went in the nurse went out.

It was a very dainty and exquisitely kept room — like a nursery in a doll's house. He thought of his own nursery — always strewn with papers and torn pictures and shabby toys. It had a chair with a broken back, an old brass-railed fire-guard which had belonged to Mrs. Mackay, a sofa with a slit cover, and a rocking-horse minus a tail. This room was lighted with electric

light. The toys were bright, just as they had come from the shop; mechanical toys, not broken; dollies that had not lost their heads or their eyes; woolly animals with all their wool, and india-rubber animals without a hole.

The chair was wound to its highest, and in it, exquisitely dressed, sat her child. The crooked legs stuck out nervelessly; the hands were loose and empty on the wooden tray of the chair; the feet had shoes which were shining and shapely. It struck Owen as terrible, more terrible than anything else — they were not in the least rubbed at the toes.

He looked at the wizened, weary face and at the head without a hair. The nursery, with Harriott's wide, desperate eyes, swished by him like a merry-go-round. He realised that but for Mrs. Megson's well-meant garrulity on the day of the party the child might have been his. He did not admit Dandie as an obstacle. He would have won her had he the mind.

He looked and looked. With all his soul he loved the mother of this deplorable creature.

"Well!" said Harriott, just as she had said "well" to Mrs. Megson.

Her voice was clear like a whistle through frost.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Do! Is there anything that can be done?"

"No. But why did you come to me? You are rich; you must have had the very best advice possible."

"Of course I have. Every specialist in London has seen this child, and they all struck at me with the same words — 'Hopeless idiot.' I have taken it to hospitals, too. I have herded for whole days in suffocating corri-

dors waiting my turn to go in to the doctors. The other women — such women, smelling of drink and frowsty clothes — pitied me. Just think what it means to be pitied by people like that. They had children, too. Oh, what an army of terrible children! And my child belonged to it — might have commanded it."

"Yes, yes; but why did you come to me? I can do nothing more for you than they have done."

"You are keen. Of course I had a special reason." She gave him a slow mournful smile. "We will come to that presently. It is a hopeless idiot, just because it is my child. Aunt Megson told me too late. I will never speak to Aunt Megson again. A woman such as I am — with such terrible possibilities in her love — should not marry."

"Harriott — my poor Harriott — what can I do?"

"You can do it all — you can do everything," she told him rapidly. "You loved me once; you would have married me. I want your help. Do you remember that day when I wondered if you would always fail me at a crisis? I wonder if you are going to fail me now."

The child was dribbling — moistening the lace on its frock to a limp rag and turning the pale ribbons rose-coloured.

"The tiresome woman always forgets to put on a bib," she said, as she bent down and dabbed at the red chin with her handkerchief.

Then she straightened herself, looked at him with a flicker of the old daring in her blue eyes, and said, —

"Do you mind telling me if you love me still?"

She put the question so suddenly, with such a surpris-

ing lack of embarrassment, that it staggered him. She did not seem to think that Polly counted in the game. He stuck out his thick lips in the old, thoughtful, sulky fashion.

"Yes," he said at last, in a shamefaced way, "I am a scoundrel, but I love you still."

"I am glad, very glad." She caught her hands round his arm as she had so often done in Brixton days. "I hoped it. I want your help. Will you?"

"What?"

She hesitated; the nervous twitch crossed her face. She looked at her child with emotion — the wrong emotion. Then she set her teeth fiercely behind her locked lips, stepped back, and flung out her arm. Had Mrs. Gatley, dormant in the hushed world of second childhood, been there to see, it would have reminded her of the August evening in the Five Yew when Rosalie, with the same theatrical air, pointed to her drunken husband.

"Look!" she said — it was the very word her dead mother had used — "Look!" Her strong round arm seemed to brood over the child. "I want you to help me get rid of this!"

CHAPTER IX

HE was so startled that he blundered to his feet.

"You want — what?" he gasped.

"I want you to help me get rid of this," she repeated calmly, looking at the passive creature in the high chair. "I am in a difficulty — that is all. You cannot deny that it —" she never gave the child sex or name — "would be better in an asylum."

"Why, yes," — he sat down again and wiped his face with his handkerchief — "possibly it might. But what does your husband think? Surely he —"

"He does not know anything about it. Do listen quietly. It is a matter of life or death to me."

"I am all attention," he said, with the gloomy, abstracted look falling again over his face. "I promise not to interrupt. But I commit myself to nothing without your husband's sanction."

She shrugged — the familiar, irresponsible gesture of Brixton again. It made his blood bound.

"Dandie went to South America last September," she said. "He went on business connected with a legacy. There have been disputes and a law-suit. But he would have been home before if I had not persuaded him to keep away. I am afraid to let him come — you understand. He is so fond of the child: it would break his heart if he knew the truth. When

he went away it was just as it is now — very fat, very vacant — but a baby, and one does not expect anything else from a baby — at least he did not. Nearly a year ago, and I never thought! It has not changed one bit. The months go on, and it — it *sticks*."

She spat the word out as Polly spat out her favourite word, "Stupid!" She looked at him; the lids of her eyes were pink and moist.

"The doctors only tell me to prepare for worse as time goes on, and they all say that it will very likely live to old age. I've been deceiving Dandie. I write a letter every week. I read up children's books, and watch the children I meet. I listened to your little ones to-night — they will come into the next letter. Sometimes I tell the same stories again and again — he writes and says so. He thinks that she can walk and talk; that she is like other children — only a little forward for her age. It has been very difficult" — the pathetic, unquenchable fun twinkled in her eyes, like a will-o'-the-wisp over a grave — "to jumble up twenty — a hundred — children and make one. I have not heard from him lately. He told me in his last letter that he would soon be home. He cannot keep away from the child any longer. He will come expecting everything, and he will find — this!"

"But he will not blame you."

"Yes, he will. A man like Dandie does not forgive deceit, and imperfection worries him. You do not know him. He is slow and rather small-witted — dear Dandie! But he hates a lie. If I keep my child, I lose my husband — do you understand? Look at it! Which would you keep if you were a woman?"

"You want to put it away and tell him it is dead?" he asked slowly.

"I mean to put it away and find another to take its place. A woman always goes one better!" she returned with rapid, positive decision.

"I could not lend myself —"

"Now, wait. Listen a little longer," she said pleadingly. "I cannot deprive him of paternal emotion — some men are like that; they ought to be mothers, not fathers. I haven't much sympathy with the feeling, but I'm prepared to admit that it is natural and creditable. I'm going to indulge Dandie, because he is the one person in the world for whom I care a tittle."

"My professional position —" he began feebly.

She swept aside this respectable objection with a movement of her hands.

"You must; you shall. It must all be done before Wednesday, or not at all. There is an old friend of Dandie's — an old flame — in a way. She suspects me, but she does not know of what. And it has just dawned on her that she has not seen the child for nearly a year. I have managed; it has been in bed, or out of doors, or there did not happen to be time. She is coming to see it on Wednesday. She will insist. I know Ann Chance. In four days — four days! I must have another child by then, or my whole life is ruined. You were very fond of me once, and you say you are fond of me still. Then you must want me to be happy. And it is very simple. Lots of people have children that they would only be too glad to get rid of. A doctor knows of them. Find me another child, and let me call it mine — and his."

She stopped, and sat looking at him anxiously. Her face was pulled out of shape by great haggard furrows; her eyes were wide and stupid-looking, and strangely pale against the dead yellow of her skin.

He took the child out of the chair, and held it on his knee, taking in every detail of it critically. Then he put it back, and said nothing. Harriott watched and waited. It seemed to her that she had already waited through eternity. He said haltingly, at last, "You saw that young woman who came up the steps to-night, just as I was going for a cab?"

"Yes," she returned eagerly, catching at his drift at once.

"Well, she has a child."

"A girl?"

"A girl. It is illegitimate. The father — she does not know. It is a bright little child — healthy, pretty, and about the age of this."

"Is it a fair child? Dandie and I are both so fair."

"It is very fair."

"And you'll let me have it. You'll arrange it for me. I will pay anything. But I must have sole charge. She shall not even know where it is. That would not be safe."

She caught her hands round his arm. He unclasped them with clumsy, shaking fingers. His whole big body quivered at her touch.

"She would not want to know. She does not ask for money — only to be rid of it. She is a servant — a general servant. It takes nearly all her money to pay for the board of the child. She is fond of finery. Her mistress grumbles because she wears shabby dresses in

the house. She has begged me to find a home for it. Sometimes rich, childless people want to adopt a baby, but I have not heard of any one."

Harriott slid back to her chair, and the lines of her face smoothed out.

"Then that is settled," she said, hardly above her breath. "When can I have it? Where shall I send the other? No doubt you can recommend a good private asylum where every care would be taken. I do not wish to spare expense."

She met his eyes, which seemed suddenly hard and contemptuous behind his glasses. She flushed with shame, and burst out impetuously, "No doubt you think me something short of a woman. I cannot help that. We are not responsible for ourselves. I've gone against Nature, who evidently owes the Wickens a grudge. I wasn't meant to be a mother. I have not the necessary equipment of sensations. I want my husband's love; I want to see him happy, and that is all I care."

"It will be found out," he impressed on her. "There are your servants and your friends. Do you mean to take any one else into your confidence? Is there to be a wholesale conspiracy against Mr. Darnell?"

He wanted to be practical, not satirical; but she shrank from him as if he had pointed a pistol at her heart.

"Certainly not. Only you and I will know the truth. A month's wages will settle the servants. As for friends," she flung out her hands and hitched up her shoulders at the same time, "London is a lonely place. I have no friends. We are not suburban here; we do

not watch our neighbours from bow windows nor scrape acquaintance over back-garden walls. There are no local — anythings. I have quarrelled with Aunt Megson. There is only Ann. The women at the club do not count; we never visit. Mrs. Ellis," she was speaking more to herself than to him, "is always bothering me to bring the baby so that it can make friends with Mona, and now — after Wednesday — I shall be able to do it."

"There are the people in the other flats. They see the child go up and down."

"I shall leave the flat. Our agreement expires in three weeks. I shall go to Kensington; that is well out of the way. I shall tell Dandie that I thought the air better."

Owen shook his head, and said monotonously, as he had said frequently while she eloquently exposed her simple scheme of absolute safety, —

"There is my position as a professional man, and I always prided myself on my good principles."

"It is quite, quite safe. Haven't you been listening?" she asked impatiently. "As for principles, they are all, good or bad, equally objectionable. And you ought to go away now. The servants will begin to wonder. And Polly —"

"Never mind Polly," he said stiffly, just as once he had told Polly not to mind Harriott. Then he added: —

"Let things stay as they are; it will be more satisfactory. Let him take his share — it is his child."

"His child!" she cried scornfully. "Did he give it a diseased body and no brain? Look at it! Is it like him? Aunt Megson says it is a Wicken all over. I'm

healthy, I'm happy, and enjoy every moment of my life, except the moments I am obliged to spend in this terrible room. And yet I have dealt out such horrors! I declare that if I allowed myself to feel or to care—or to stop—I should go mad with responsibility. It is all in me—all that!" She pointed to the complicated chair and the figure in it. "Sometimes I look at it, and feel afraid of myself. I must be dreadful, too; it is perhaps only waiting an opportunity to come out. I will do everything. Your professional position will be quite safe, and your principles. To-day is Saturday, to-morrow being Sunday does not count. On Monday I shall make arrangements for warehousing the furniture, and I shall stay for a little while at the hotel where Dandie and I stayed until we took this flat. I shall pay off the servants. On Tuesday morning we will take the child to a first-class asylum—no doubt you know of one. On Tuesday evening that girl will hand me over the other child. There; it is simple!"

"There is a person," he said, "who wants the charge of a child. She lives a mile or two from Mitcham. Will that do? I can recommend her. Her name is Kempe—Mrs. Kempe."

Harriott nodded.

"Of course. When and where can you meet me?"

"At Mitcham, on Tuesday, at twelve o'clock. It is a tiresome journey. Give yourself plenty of time. You'd better go from Victoria and change at Croydon."

"Yes, and now you must go. Good-by. It is very, very good of you."

She put out her hand, and he took it and held it, looking at her helplessly—pleadingly, as if he, even at

this stage, hoped to be let off. But there was no mercy in her; she was desperate.

He went back gloomily to Brixton, his head down and his lips out.

He walked home from the station very slowly, in the streaming rain. He was afraid to face Polly; she had been a good wife. And he was a scoundrel. He kept lashing himself with that word. But he could not help it; he must save Harriott. He loved her, and that was excuse enough — it made the thing inevitable.

He had been obliged to promise in the magic of her presence, and he would not turn back. The Welsh doggedness which had made him, a man of limited attainments, come with flying colors through his medical examinations, which had made him resign all thoughts of winning Harriott because he was not satisfied with her family history, made him loyal — madly, wickedly loyal to her now. He loved her. She had never been a woman to him, a mere bundle of flesh, bone, and blood. She had never been quite real; she was different. Polly was a woman — housewifely, child-bearing, sharp-tongued Polly. But Harriott was a fay. She touched him spiritually; she was a glittering, alluring, fitful thing — quite outside good dinners, well-darned socks, irreproachable buttons, stiff, glazed shirt-fronts, and the various things that go to make a man's comfort.

He felt fonder of Polly, more tender than he had ever felt before. Poor Polly! He was treating her badly. She had worked hard for his professional position — the position he was risking. He was very proud of his position and quite satisfied. He had none of the restless longing of a London doctor — to move West and ever

West. He was not a Londoner ; he was suburban, and he loved the respectable, narrow things that suburban life gave him. He was proud of his big Brixton house — bright red and white, like a peppermint-stick. He thought that no man need wish for a better. He never went up the steps without throwing a gratified glance at the burnished plate and the blazing lamp. He was always congratulating himself on having got out of Montgomeryshire — and kept out. But now he was risking it all. If Daniel Darnell found out, then he was a ruined man, with worse than Montgomeryshire in prospect. But how could he resist Harriott ? The very lace at her neck and arms was a web ; her lightest touch held him like a vice. She was the potter, and he the helpless clay.

CHAPTER X

It was another streaming day on Tuesday when they met at Mitcham. It had been wet on Sunday and Monday, as if the weather wept at their rashness and foresaw the end.

Harriott was first at the station. She had found the cross-country journey very trying. As she waited for Owen on the platform many trains whizzed through the station. None stopped; this place was forgotten, dead. She saw the flying faces of the passengers as the trains flashed by. White faces, with indistinguishable features — wistful, curious ghosts.

When Owen arrived she was sitting erect and pale on the seat, throwing a look now and then at a black trunk near. The child was on her lap; she just kept it from falling with a listless, unwilling grasp, as if it were a discreditable parcel that she was anxious to be rid of.

"This is a dreadfully out-of-the-way place," she grumbled by way of greeting.

"I'm afraid it is. I had a bother to get here in time," returned Owen, a little curtly.

They were both ruffled and ill at ease.

They drove away from the station, the rain thudding on the roof of the fly and making a pattern on the closed windows. When Owen gave the address, the flyman turned his horse and whipped along a lonely road.

Harriott stared out at the drenched, brown common, at great market gardens laid out in squares like floral chess-boards, with the moving labourers for men. She saw a few melancholy villas, mostly in pairs, thin, shell-like things. Some more were being built. On the grass by the wayside the water-pipes were waiting, lying along the ground like bloated brown snakes. The grey, low sky seemed mercifully trying to shroud everything.

She crouched back on the faded blue cushions of the fly. It seemed to her that she was bringing the child to the extreme edge of the world—the common so far-reaching and so sad; so hopeless in its monotony. This place was only one step from extinction. But it was safe. Dandie would never come here. He would never think of this place. He would never find it.

The fly stopped at a small square house. It was hardly more than a cottage. A little, late Georgian house, flat, red, and sad. It was shut in by shrubberies of laurel and fir: they made a sad “drip, drip,” and the ground beneath was pooled with yellowish water. The narrow windows with their wooden frames peered out dolefully at the streaming country. It was like stepping into a vapour bath to step into that house. Harriott almost ran from the gate to the porch—it was raining so relentlessly, and she never forgot that there were ostrich tips in her hat. It was impossible to hold up an umbrella. The child and her skirt took both hands.

“Tell him,” she called out hurriedly to Owen, who was speaking to the flyman, “that we shall not be long.”

The maid who opened the door had a limp cap, and

as she led the way along the passage Harriott saw grey lining at the elbows of her shiny black cashmere gown. There was a fire, newly lighted and smoking, in the little cell-like room dignified by the name of drawing-room. It had wooden walls, which were painted a sad stone colour. Some one had dragged out the easy-chairs to face one another in conversational attitudes. The same some one had rumpled the sofa cushions, left a bit of fancy-work, very grubby, on a side-table, and placed a magazine, out of date, with a paper-knife handy, on another table.

As they sat speechless in the little room, with its sober walls and its forced air of rakishness, they heard voices, doors stealthily shut and open. Outside, the flyman, the fly, and the disconsolate horse seemed to be slowly dissolving. The child sat silent on Harriott's knee in a loose, torpid heap. She never looked at it, whether from design or not, Owen, who was closely watching her, could not tell. Then the door opened with a creak and Mrs. Kempe came in. Owen had written and prepared her for the child.

She had reached that stage in a woman's life when you could not guess her age within ten years—the stage between twenty-eight and forty. She was obviously uncomfortable in her best gown and her best room out of hours. A little dirty, smart, and mincing woman! She looked like a shabby artificial flower—those that they set in green cardboard boxes outside the low-class drapers at sale time, and mark magnificently, “French sprays. All in this box 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ d.”

They sat and talked awkwardly about terms. Mrs. Kempe, bridling and throwing up her fuzzy head, was

careful to say that she had never done this sort of thing before, and hastened to add that she would make an exception "to oblige Dr. Owens." But it was settled at last, the child, chief actor in the drama, taking no part. Mrs. Kempe looked at it with horribly curious interest.

"Has it really turned two?" she asked.

"It is two years and a month old," Harriott returned in her hard, fluty voice, and staring out at the coachman, who was beaded all over with rain.

"Will she come to me?"

"Certainly. To any one."

They transferred the child from one lap to the other.

Harriott twisted her shoulders with an air of relief. Then she looked at Owen and rose abruptly.

"We need not keep the man waiting any longer."

"But you must stay and have some refreshment. I have arranged a little lunch." Mrs. Kempe struggled up, still holding the child, and rang the bell. Her eyes contracted as a heavy smash came from the kitchen, which was through the wall.

"No. We have not time, thank you. Then it is all settled? There are plenty of clothes in the trunk—plenty. I did not bring toys; she does not notice them. But you can buy some if you think it desirable. And you will feed her on milk and the patent food I spoke of. Yes. Did I mention—or perhaps Dr. Owens did—that I am her aunt? The parents are both dead," said Harriott, lying callously, and with her vague eyes on a damp patch on the wall.

"Her aunt? Oh, really! No, the doctor did not mention it." Mrs. Kempe gave a smile that was three

parts a knowing smirk. Harriott flinched at the look of vulgar assumption on the woman's face. Then her lips left off quivering. It was all part of the performance.

"I will send you a cheque once a quarter."

"Thank you. And how often will you be coming to see your little — niece?"

"Oh! never, never."

Her emphatic words fell like hailstones in the room, where they were all standing up. The coal smoke belched from the grate and shed itself sadly in smuts; the carelessly disposed chairs looked as if they were waiting for the first act of a melancholy farce.

"I mean," she added, quickly recovering herself and looking at Owen in a furtive, frightened way, "that it would not be of any use. No doubt Dr. Owens will run down now and then; and if anything serious should happen you would let me know — through him."

Then she walked out into the passage, as if she were not quite sure of herself. She did not look at the child — her child. Perhaps she was afraid. A last look, the merest touch, might crumble everything. She forced herself to think only of her husband — Dandie, Dandie!

Directly they were out of sight of that grey, rain-sweating house her spirits rose. When Owen bade her good-by he was staggered by the look on her face. He thought of that day in the Megsons' drawing-room, when she had worn the velvet blouse and the smart collar; when she told him gleefully that it was settled, that Dandie had seen her people and survived the shock. It seemed as if something had dropped from her that day, and something had dropped from her now.

There were lurking dimples at her weak mouth — always smiling and screwing and twisting; her cheeks were pink, and her eyes fiercely bright. It was strange to see those blurred, soft eyes of hers glitter.

"You are to meet the girl Jenkins to-night at eight. She cannot get away before," Owen said dully.

He spoke in a wooden way, like a man who was walking through a part, and had to say three lines or so.

"To-night at eight — yes."

"She will be at Victoria Station — the Brighton line, and the ladies' first-class waiting-room."

"Very well. Good-by. It has been very good of you."

"You will go down and see Mrs. Kempe now and then?" he asked imploringly.

She opened her brilliant eyes.

"Of course not. I am surprised at you, who know the circumstances. It would not be safe, and it is not at all necessary. If I cut my finger you would call me a fool to keep tearing it open. *You* go. Here is my train. I have my hands full to-day. I am going to a registry office now for a nurse."

The train carried her away. Owen, who had quite forgotten the two-o'clock dinner which Polly never allowed to be five minutes late, looked along the line with a speculative gaze. What was she? — witch, devil, spirit? Anything but woman. She cast aside natural affections as a snake would a skin when she had done with them. She only cared for Daniel Darnell. He was not a man at all, but a tailor's dummy. Owen always thought of him contemptuously as "poor fellow," because he had the misfortune to be handsome; regular features implying a limited intellect. For him she had

cast off the two who had been father and mother to her. For him she had cast off her child. Would his turn come? Was it only a matter of waiting? She was perpetually running after new gods. Would the day come when she would cast off Dandie — as a thing done with?

He would never forget her face as she walked out of the dim red house at Mitcham. She had not looked back, although Mrs. Kempe had held the child to the window. He thought of Polly, whose sharp tongue softened to delicious, idiotic nonsense to the new baby each time it came; whose long, plain face had flashes of something more than beauty as she sat in her shabby, stuffy nursery, where there was always a smell of small clothes steaming on the guard.

Polly? Yes — but then she was a woman. There were millions like her! Harriott was unlike all the rest; there was only one Harriott. She was ethereal. He loved her. She restored the romance in him, which Wales had fanned and Brixton done its best to put out. She did what she chose with him. The horrible problem suggested itself: If Harriott had told him to kill the child, instead of bricking it in at Mitcham, would he have done it?

The moon came up grey green and threw a strange light on the wet pavements as Harriott drove to Victoria. The curtain was about to ring up on the last act. Everything was ripe for winding up. The new nurse had engaged to arrive at the hotel early in the morning, the furniture was cleared out from the flat, the two maids were paid off and had slipped away into the wide, black throat of London.

The hands of the clock were on eight as she hurried

into the station and made for the first-class waiting-room. It was empty, except for the attendant, who was doing needlework at a round table dotted with cotton-spools. Harriott sat down. She was cold and tired. In all her life she had never worked so hard as she had worked that day. The door kept opening. She looked up anxiously at each woman who came in. It was never the right woman. She grew restless and walked out into the station, which was gay and crowded now the night was fine, like a covered promenade. The people who sat packed on the seats at the side stared at her, a man turned sharply round from the bookstall to survey her broad shoulders with appreciation. It was half-past eight. Trains tore in and out, little nervous, buzzing groups like bees kept swarming to the gates. She turned back to the waiting-room full of fears. It was still empty. She sat down again, feeling more cold and languid than before. If the girl should not come! It was ten minutes to nine. The door opened. She started up, then plumped back to her seat as a couple of fat, middle-aged women waddled in to ask the attendant to take charge of a parcel. If she should not come! If all the trouble, the lying, the shame, the risk, had been for nothing! She had wild thoughts of going to Brixton and getting the girl's address from Owen. Perhaps there was a mistake. She might be sitting in the other station, getting impatient too, and half inclined to go back with the child. Would it be safe to go and look in the other waiting-rooms? The door opened again — to let the middle-aged women out. Before it swung back another woman came in : it was the girl Jenkins.

She was leading a toddling child, who seemed sleepy and cross. Whenever it stumbled, she swung it to its feet again by a vigorous jerk of her wrist. It had been crying, and she had tried to calm it by a present of chocolate from the automatic box. There was a wide, moist band of rich brown outlining the little red mouth. Harriott met her in the middle of the room.

"I thought you were not coming," she said. "You have kept me waiting more than an hour."

"I am very sorry, ma'am. But you know—or rather you don't know—what service is. Whenever it's your night out the mistress wants something extra done, or a friend drops in. I believe they do it on purpose. And the woman who had the child lives out Clapham way."

"Well, never mind, now you are here. Is this the child? How old is it?"

She looked at the little creature as she would have looked at a novel grotesque for her drawing-room. The girl did not seem disconcerted or abashed.

"Yes, ma'am, this is my little Evelyn. But she always calls herself—she can't speak quite plain yet—Linnie. She'll be three in August. Look at the pretty lady, Linnie dear."

The child stared up. It had eyes of undecided colour, brownish-grey, but it was a very pretty child, and it looked quite a patrician child, too, in spite of an old red poke bonnet which stood up in big dirty frills from the dainty face, and an old red coat trimmed with dyed rabbit-skin. She kept looking tearfully from one woman to the other, as if they were both equally strange. Harriott turned her back to the round table, where the attendant sat.

"I will take her with me now," she said in a low, hurried voice. "You know the conditions. It is to be mine, remember. You are never to try to communicate with it. You give up all claims."

"I suppose you don't want any premium, because I could not afford that," the girl said, looking at her strangely, as if she did not half grasp the drift of those sharp, hurried words.

"Premium? I do not understand."

"Why, I can't afford to pay you for taking it. Some asks for a lump sum down. I could have done that lots of times."

"Of course I do not want money." Harriott flushed. "I only want the child. I—I have not one of my own."

"Ah!" the girl looked her up and down enviously, "that's the way of the world. It's us poor girls that have the children. And now I must be getting back. I've only got till ten. You never saw such a nigger-driving place! But now she's off my hands I can afford to be independent. I shall give notice. It's been a regular drag on me, I can tell you. Five shillings a week and nothing for it. What's the good of a child if you never see it? She won't come to me—she doesn't know me from the cat. She's been crying all the way in the train for her 'mummy,' as she calls her. Poor little thing!" she looked down at the small, red-coated figure with a note of something sacred scored across her flimsy, common face. "She's got his eyes," she said, after a pause. "The father's, you know. He was a beauty, he was. I've never seen him from that day to this."

Harriott got up abruptly, the scandalised red running into her waxen cheeks. She was sick, so sick and cold and tired. She had waded through mire that day to her very chin. But this was the last.

"You bring the child," she said, opening the door of the waiting-room. "She will come better with you. And I will tell the porter to get a cab."

She made the girl put the poor little thing, whose face was piteously solemn, into a corner.

"Let the man drive up Victoria Street," she said awkwardly. "I will tell him the number later on."

The girl laughed in her face. She was a very objectionable girl, dirtily smart, and full of repressed impudence.

"You needn't be afraid of me trying to find you out," she said, with a little pert wrinkle of her broad nose, and a laugh that set Harriott jangling like an octave of bells. "It's been hard work for me to make that five shillings a week. You should just see my boots! The water's leaking in at every step I take. Good-by, Linnie. Give us a kiss. Poor little lamb! She's as frightened of me as she is of you. I haven't seen much of her. When you only get one day out a month you like to go somewhere and enjoy yourself. It's a kind lady, Linnie. Lady give Linnie toys and sweets."

She put her head, the front hair of which was curled so tightly that it seemed dull wool, into the cab. But the child turned away. A look, half pained and half savage, came into the mother's bold eyes as she fell back on the curb.

"Tell him to drive on," Harriott said impatiently.

As the cab wheeled round she saw the girl Jenkins

go skimming across the station-yard, dodging the omnibuses and licking up mud with her violet skirt because she was reluctant to show her sodden boots.

She saw her disappear with immense relief. All the degradation was over. She felt certain she would be fond of the child. She was so immensely grateful to it. She looked at it quite tolerantly as it sat staring at her gravely from the corner of the cab, a small, damp wedge of chocolate fast in one red fist.

She took it on her knee. It seemed too terrified to cry. The flashing lights, the noises, and the two strange women had paralysed it, because it was just old enough to feel afraid.

What a pretty child! Dandie would be very fond of it, and he would be more fond and more proud of her, too. Properly dressed, it would be much prettier than Mrs. Ellis's Mona. A little glow of anticipation ran through her languid body.

When they were well up Victoria Street she made the driver turn back towards Kensington. Just before they reached the hotel she wrapped the little one in a shawl, so that no one in the entry or on the stairs should see the tell-tale red coat with the rabbit-skin. She gathered the shawl over the child's head, too, and hid the bonnet—a terrible bonnet with upstanding frills of cheap red cloth and a greasy cap-front.

CHAPTER XI

"I BROUGHT the child on to the club. I felt sure of finding you here," Harriott said.

Ann was in the drawing-room, which was an up-to-date, artistic apartment, of which the club was very proud. The effect was snug and pleasing to a not too critical eye. There were little slim-legged tables; cosy tub or wing chairs were upholstered in bold tapestry. There was a white-wood overmantel, a hearth tiled with glazed peacock tiles, and the whole effect of the room was spoiled by printed willow-pattern plates carefully wired and hung on the French-grey walls. That is the way with your smart, superficial art.

Linnie had been crying a little, because she did not like the movement of the lift. There were two great, glistening tears on her little russet cheeks. Directly Ann saw her she threw down the *Queen* and gave a cry of astonishment.

"How it has improved! Why, it does not look the same!"

Harriott sat down in one of the round tub-chairs. The green-and-blue tapestry framed her. She held her sunshade lightly across her knees, and said, with a hard, full smile — March sun through storm: —

"Of course it has improved. I told you so: the ugly babies always turn out the prettiest."

"But it isn't in the least like what it was," Ann insisted.

She took the child on her knee and kept looking, first at it and then at smiling Harriott, in bewilderment.

"How nicely you dress it!" she said thoughtfully; "I never got the pinafore, by the way. We can drive down Bond Street after lunch, and you shall choose. I always think these long skirts and Puritan caps such good form. Mrs. Ellis does it with Mona. But she has rich silks, which is a mistake, and gives a circus-rider sort of effect. I like this cashmere. It is quite new, isn't it? The fold is hardly out of the stuff."

"Not very new. What is there to eat to-day?"

Ann did not appear to hear.

"It is like Daniel," she said at last; "oh, certainly, remarkably like Daniel."

"But he has grey eyes." Harriott bent forward and looked eagerly at the lovely healthy little face.

"And this child, now I think of it," Ann went on, "had blue eyes — very like yours. But such dull, stupid eyes — there did not seem to be any pupil. You know I always thought it a little monster."

"All babies have blue eyes," Harriott said, with a full, matronly air of experience. "Now let us go into the dining-room. I am hungry."

When they were settled at table she said politely to Linnie, —

"Would you like a little meat and potato and gravy?"

"Like pudden," said the child, sturdily, and shaking her delightful curly head.

A quick, painful colour came creeping into Harriott's face.

Ann laughed.

"That is the nurse," she said; "they teach children to speak very badly."

The little one was staring about her complacently. New clothes and a new dolly had already healed her heart.

"Linnie like pudden!" she repeated with emphasis.

"What's that she calls herself?"

"Linnie. She will do it. They get such strange ideas. We'll give her some stewed fruit and cream."

"You ought to have brought her here long ago. She is a darling."

"Oh! children are a tie. But I was obliged to this morning. I've left the flat. Slimper was rude, and measles were about. The furniture went to the Depository yesterday, and I am staying at Marshall's."

She spoke in a very matter-of-fact way, as if it were an ordinary enough incident. Ann looked at her fixedly, over the child's round head. There was certainly a new ingredient in Harriott.

They had barely finished lunch before the page came into the room with a telegram. He carried it to the table in the corner by the window, and gave it to Harriott.

"Don't look so frightened," cried Ann, who did not miss the sudden wild look in the pale eyes. She never missed a word or a look of Harriott's. She was solving a puzzle.

Harriott had the thin pink slip of paper with the thickly written words held close to her eyes. It was quivering like the last leaf of a tree in autumn, because her hands were palsied. She looked about the room vacantly. The tables, with their blue-and-orange flowers

in quaint jars, seemed to sway. It was an arrangement of corn-flowers and dark-centred marigolds that day. Every marigold had a threatening eye. There was a tightness at her heart. She looked at Ann; she looked at Linnie. The little one was shovelling in cream with the relish of a gormand.

And then she thought that yesterday, about this time, she was at Mitcham. If she had delayed a day! The blood rushed to her head and bubbled in her ears. The noise beneath in Bond Street was threatening; she seemed to hear the roar of a menacing crowd. Every sound cried out against *her*, because she was a traitor and a liar, because she had deliberately violated a woman's most sacred instinct, and with her own hands had made a grave for her own child — flesh of her flesh. Oh! that red flat house at Mitcham! It put itself before her, shutting out the dainty room, the dainty woman, the dainty child.

Ann said sharply, "Wake up! you look as if you had been opium eating."

In answer, Harriott flung the pink paper on the table, and gave the little, empty, cackling laugh that she always gave when she was very much moved. The telegram was from Dandie, who had telegraphed in vain to the flat in Oxford Street. He was in England. His train was due at Waterloo in half an hour.

"I always told you," said Ann, with an impressive air and an even more intent look on her face, "that he would take us by surprise like this. You do not seem overpleased."

"I — I — well, I cannot believe it just yet." Harriott pushed her plate roughly aside. She caught the child's

cap up from the floor where Ann had let it slip when they put her to the table. She wiped the yellow cream from the little mouth, with a handkerchief so fine that it seemed impalpable and billowy, like a cloud.

"We must make haste," she said jerkily. "You are going to see your father."

"Going to see daddy," supplemented Ann.

But the child simply stared at them, with a little pucker of the faint brown brows. Ann laughed.

"Children are comic," she said. "Little bits of you but more bits of Daniel. *You* ruck your eyebrows like that when you don't understand anything."

Harriott, who had tried twice in vain to tie a bow, succeeded the third time, pulling the satin ribbon out widely, in two loose ears under the child's chin.

"She doesn't remember her father," she said, stooping down, and saying in a metallic voice : —

"Daddy, daddy. You see she doesn't take any notice, but she will soon learn. How proud Dandie will be! Oh, yes! Dandie will be very proud."

"We must be quick or his train will be in." Ann caught up her fur tie and gave a rapid glance at the glass.

Harriott looked embarrassed, then she said quickly and nervously : —

"You must let us go alone, please. I want to meet him quite alone. You are not hurt, are you? Married people are peculiar." The cackling laugh ran weakly out again. "Come round to Marshall's and have breakfast with us to-morrow morning, as early as you like."

She kissed the child once or twice on the way to Waterloo. She was so grateful to it. She kept saying

coaxingly, "Mummy, mummy. Linnie must call me mummy."

But the solemn eyes only looked at her in a puzzled, stubborn way. The child had not quite forgotten yet that there had been once — a very dim, long time ago — another mummy.

They told her that the Southampton train came in at the new station and was not due for five minutes. Directly she had made sure of the platform and begun to walk slowly up and down, a great bashfulness swept her. She was shy of Dandie: it was so long since he went away. And she wished that she had been able to go back to the hotel and do her hair better and put on another veil. These fine ones with big spots were very trying. She went into the waiting-room and was disgusted to find no looking-glass. And then she saw it coming into the station with a cruel, graceful sweep — the train that carried Dandie.

Linnie began to shrink and cry when she saw the green, belching engine. Harriott caught her tightly by the hand and stood trembling on the platform as the train flashed in a thin, narrow line by her dazzled eyes. She looked in every first-class carriage for Dandie, but did not see him. But when all the people were out she found him at the luggage-van looking after his trunks. His face was brown and shining, like a piece of wood which had been frequently oiled. He was rather stouter than he had been when he went away, and the ulster he wore was new. That was all. He was just the same dear, handsome, insipid-looking Dandie. She went up, her feet throbbing and bending under her at every step she took. She pushed by an excited woman who was

calling out for a yellow tin box, and touched the sleeve of the new ulster. Dandie, built in with luggage, wheeled round impatiently.

"Ah, Harriott!" he said carelessly. "Go into the waiting-room, dear, and I'll come to you when I've got the luggage. I'm afraid they've left my brown Gladstone behind, confound them!"

She backed away from the boxes, the fish baskets, and hampers. Was this all? What a greeting! And after all she had done! She actually began to take credit to herself. She had spared him lifelong misery, and he had not even looked at the child. She gripped the tiny, flabby hand fiercely. It was a relief to hurt something.

Dandie came into the waiting-room and shut the door carefully behind him. Then he took her completely in his arms, almost lifting her off her feet. She shut her eyes and let him drop kisses all over her pale, twitching face. It was so delightful to feel his little soft, straw-coloured mustache on her skin again and to smell the particular, slightly scented tobacco which he always used for cigarettes.

"I couldn't speak to you on the platform, darling," he said apologetically. "It is such bad form to make a scene. I'm glad enough to get home again, and we've knocked that dirty Spaniard into a cocked hat."

Linnie had climbed up to the seat and was staring at him gravely, with the costly doll that Harriott had bought hugged tightly to her tiny chest.

"Is this the baby? How she has changed! Why, darling, she is perfectly lovely."

He looked at the quaint figure as if his eyes could

never leave it. He caught the child up and kissed her, and danced her and made fond, idiotic faces. Then he put her down, saying:—

“How heavy she is! And what an improvement! I should never have known her.”

“Babies always change,” said Harriott, mechanically. “I am glad you think she has improved. Ann was saying this morning that she was lovely.”

“So she is.”

He looked from one to the other tenderly.

“By Jove! a man ought to be proud of such a wife and such a child. How delighted I am to get home and settle down!”

He kissed Harriott again, and then for the second time he caught up the child, who laughed in a friendly way and held out the dolly, pulling up its skirt and saying solemnly, “Red shoes.”

Harriott had never been so satisfied in her life. She loved caresses, hungered for them like a cat. She ran her eye round the walls and over the table, and felt quite an affection for the pictures of ocean liners and holiday resorts, for the Jewish magazine, and even for the smeary water-bottle, half full of brown liquid which no one ever had the courage to drink.

The door swung back and two smart-looking girls came in. Dandie at once became laboriously polite and stiff.

“Stay here while I get a cab,” he said curtly to Harriott.

When they were all three packed in it, with the luggage stacked on top, he asked her why his telegram to the Oxford Street flat had not reached her.

“I felt quite uncomfortable when it was returned to

me," he said reproachfully. "When a man has been away so long he feels anxious, of course, about his wife and child. And I meant to catch an earlier train from Southampton."

"I am very sorry. We are staying for the present at Marshall's. I thought of taking a flat at Kensington; it will be very healthy for the child. I only left on Tuesday. The furniture is all warehoused. It was very sudden, but Slimper grew impertinent, as these men always do; and the people in the flat across the landing had a child ill. One of the maids said it was measles and that they were trying to hush it up. I did not want to risk anything for Linnie."

"You were quite right," he said approvingly. "So Slimper was cheeky, was he? I must go and have a talk with him."

"Please don't! It was nothing much—a few words about the coal. I shall be very annoyed if you go back there."

"Very well, I won't go if you would rather not," said Dandie, easily. "But we must get into another flat at once. I want to settle down."

They took one at Kensington, very near the Gardens. Ann was disgusted.

"People say that London is a large place," she remarked to Harriott. "Quite a mistake; London is an absurdly little place. It is bounded on the east by Oxford Circus, on the west by the Marble Arch, on the south by Hyde Park Corner, and on the north by Bryans-ton Square. You are quite out of the world: it is only a shade less deplorable than living at Bayswater. And you are getting so painfully domesticated, too. It is

not worth one's while to come all the way from civilisation just to see Dandie smiling at the baby."

"Yes, we are getting domesticated," Harriott admitted ruefully.

Dandie had been home six weeks, and things were exactly in the same position as they were before he went away — except that the baby was more in evidence. He adored the child, and because he adored it Harriott grew to hate it bitterly. It came between them. She speedily found out that she had made a mistake — that this juggling with children was a fatal, irreparable blunder, which would wreck her life. A thousand times she asked herself why she had not told him that their own child was dead, and so kept him to herself. This was all one got by pandering to a man's weakness. He was idiotically paternal. If they went out, he insisted on taking Linnie. He loved to stroll in the Gardens on Sunday afternoons so that Linnie might hear the music. Or he begged broken bread from the cook and stuffed his pockets with it so that Linnie might feed the ducks. Harriott on these occasions would walk monotonously beside him, silent and contemptuous. Only once she burst out savagely, as they passed a stunted mechanic who was docilely wheeling a perambulator for his wife : —

"That man is just like you, Dandie. I believe that you would do that."

Dandie opened his clear eyes and smiled into her gloomy face.

"Why, of course I would, rather than you should do it," he returned, with an air of surprise.

He was a nursery man. A nursery woman, like Polly Owens, was bad enough. But a nursery man! Yes, they

were certainly growing domesticated, and she had a savage intolerance of domesticity. It was Brixton — with a very slight difference.

All the bad in her bubbled up. She delighted to take away Linnie's toys, when Dandie was well out of the way. She told herself fiercely that they belonged by right to her child, and that no one else should touch them. It was a relief to her to strike the small, exquisite thing. She liked to see the soft flesh crimson and to watch the half-terrified look in the grey-brown eyes. At times she had a mind to confess the whole plot. She longed to take Dandie to that red tomb near Mitcham and show him, and say, "There! that is our child," and then leave him for ever.

He insisted on having Linnie in the dressing-room leading out of their bedroom, so that he could creep in at all hours of the night if she stirred. Very early in the morning he used to take her into bed, and Harriott, half asleep, would be disturbed by the romping and chatter.

Once he said bitterly that she was the most unnatural woman in the world. Even the child never called her mother: it had no name for her. That evening, when he stole into the dressing-room after dinner, Harriott followed him. Linnie had tossed off the clothes and was lying naked in the cot, with a twisted swathe of white nightgown under her chin. Harriott made no attempt to cover her: she did not seem to see. Dandie covered the round body himself, with tender, clumsy fingers. He looked at Harriott as he did it: the look seared her very heart. Her indifference had only puzzled and pained him at first; as time went on it estranged

him from her. The lovelier, the sturdier, the child grew, the more spiteful she became and the more infatuated he grew. He was the sort of man to care more for his children than his wife.

He sometimes regretted that Linnie was growing out of babyhood. Harriott was horrified, hopeless, one day when he said, in a matter-of-fact fashion, and without a shade of embarrassment:—

“By-and-by, when our family grows larger, we shall have to give up living in a flat. Your Aunt Megson was right: a house some distance out of London would suit us better. Of course I don’t mean Brixton. How would you like a place with an acre or so of garden and a paddock? We could keep a horse.”

So it had been in vain. He was not content even now. He wanted more children — more, and ever more. He had the instincts of a patriarch. The thought of giving birth to another child turned her sick with apprehension.

One day there was a scene. He came into the room suddenly, and caught her beating Linnie. She was clutching at the little thing’s arm with one hand and hitting her savagely with the other. The child swung round at every slap and cried piteously.

“You’ll break her arm if you twist her like that,” Dandie called out. The poor little puckered, tear-blistered face made his blood boil. He caught Linnie up and faced his wife. She seemed a very devil in his eyes. Her features were distorted with rage and her dull eyes blazed queerly. It dawned on him for the first time that there was an ominous change in Harriott. Although it was almost the luncheon hour, she still wore

a rather dingy dressing-gown, and her abundant light hair was twisted roughly with two hairpins at the nape of her neck. The child kept on sobbing; her hot tears trickled down between his collar and his neck, and made him twitch his head. He could not forgive Harriott. It was so unjust, so unlike a woman. He carried Linnie out of the room, and told the nurse to put her bonnet on. He did not quite know what to do with her, but it occurred to him as an inspiration to take her to the Zoölogical Gardens and get her opinion on the monkeys. They had a glorious time. He mounted the elephant quite gravely and watched the sea lion catch fishes in its mouth as the keeper threw them. Linnie was afraid of the tigers, but the parrot-house delighted her. They had tea in the gardens and then drove home. Dandie, poor fellow, had spent quite an enjoyable afternoon.

Directly Harriott was left alone she flung herself flat on the floor and cried fiercely, not caring whether the servants heard or not. She ran through a string of wild sensations. She loved Dandie; she hated him; she said between her sobs a dozen times that she had been a fool to bring that alien into their lives. And there was no going back possible now. It was for life. Then she scrambled up and stared into the glass at her swollen face and reddened, almost invisible eyes. She asked herself if she was mad; if the rotten speck in all the Wickens had touched her, too.

The weeks went on. Dandie did not give up hope. He was always trying to soften her, always probing for her maternal side. He called her softly into the dressing-room one afternoon when Linnie was sleeping after

her midday dinner. She was growing more and more lovely. This was an additional aggravation. Harriott could always see the other vacant face : it seemed to have burnt itself into her eyes since she put it away.

Dandie stooped over the cot with his hands gripped round the brass rail. He looked down fondly. All his simple heart was spread out on his feminine face as he looked at the little girl—round-limbed and bright-haired.

"I never saw such a charming child. I say it quite without prejudice," he said simply. "We ought to have her painted by some good man."

Harriott did not answer. She had turned deliberately away from the cot. He took a doll from his pocket—he rarely went out without buying Linnie a toy—and put it carefully on the shelf so that the child might see it directly she woke. Then he put his arm timidly round Harriott.

"Look at her, darling," he said pleadingly.

It was a long time since he had caressed her. She grew dizzy for a moment. She did love him so : she had spoiled her own life in order to make his full. Then she looked down at the cot, scowled, and petulantly twisted her body out of his hold. Dandie sighed, but persisted in his desire for peace. No woman could resist Linnie for ever.

"Look," he repeated ; "isn't she like me when she is asleep? I never saw the likeness so strongly before. The mouth is mine. Try to love her more, Harriott. Your own little child!"

The dressing-room was very small and the cot stood in an alcove by the window, at which hung crimson

curtains. They were drawn, to keep out the sun, and the room was flooded with hot blood-red. Harriott fell back as Dandie tried to embrace her again. The warm colour in the room accentuated the corpse-like tinge of her face.

"Like you!" she cried shrilly, twisting her hands and backing until she reached the window. She pushed the curtains close against the glass, and the folds of them half covered her. "Dandie! come out of this room. Wait a bit — I want to show you something." She looked at the opposite wall.

A box stood against it—it was the box in which she had long ago packed away her Brixton trousseau, and inside, at the very bottom, she had hidden the red coat and bonnet which Linnie had worn when her mother, the girl Jenkins, took her to Victoria. "I want to tell —"

"You'll wake the child!" he said warningly, as her voice grew shriller and Linnie rolled over in the white blankets.

"The child! the child! Always the child! I wish I could kill it!" she cried passionately, striking her foot on the floor.

The heel of her shoe made a dull thud on the polished boards, and the china-headed doll which Dandie had propped so carefully on the shelf fell off and smashed its smiling face. Linnie woke up. When she saw Harriott she cowered back and peeped out from her blankets cautiously, like a little bright-eyed rabbit on its guard. Dandie winced and took her up with exquisite gentleness.

"Put her down!" cried Harriott, vehemently, her eyes still on the box. "I want to tell you —"

She broke off ; she was afraid of him. He threw one expressive glance at her. Dandie had never looked like that before.

He took the child out again that day. The servants were beginning to pity him. On the way back he met Ann.

"What's the matter?" she asked bluntly, staring full at his haggard face.

"I'm bothered about Harriott," he admitted, looking very boyish and helpless and unhappy, with Linnie clinging confidingly to his hand; "she — she isn't the same."

"I'm glad you are beginning to see it as well as the rest of the world. All the women at the club are commenting on it, although Harriott does not go there often now. She began to alter soon after you went to Buenos Ayres."

"She acts very strangely," he said miserably. "If — if it were any woman in the world but Harriott, I should be afraid of drink — at times she is so muddled and vacant."

"Poor old fellow!" said Ann, with an exaggerated air of sympathy which stung him.

CHAPTER XII

ABOUT a week afterwards Harriott received a telegram. She held it out for Dandie to see.

"Your uncle ill. Come. — MEGSON."

It was the signal agreed on between her and Owen. Something had gone wrong. She must go to Mitcham.

Dandie was building houses for Linnie with a pack of old cards.

"Are you going?" he asked carelessly.

He looked up, the knave of spades ready in his hand. There was a sluggish look of suspicion on his face as he surveyed Harriott, standing on the rug, with her colourless face and her long hands twitching.

"I think I must," she said haltingly, letting her eyes fall under his steady gaze. "Aunt Megson will be glad to have me. I shall stay if I am wanted. You can manage for a night. Nurse will look after Linnie."

"She generally does," he returned, with a simplicity that stung her.

He went on cautiously with his second storey. Linnie was breathless with delight and interest. Her little red tongue poked out between her lips. Harriott left them. There was a dreadful look of anguish on her face as she paused at the door and saw the two fair heads so close together. Dandie no longer considered her in the least necessary. When she was ready she looked into

the room again, morbidly fascinated, just as the house fell down with a crash and Linnie gave a long-drawn "oh!" at the disaster.

"You understand that I may be gone all night?" she said deliberately. "Of course I cannot be sure."

"Stay, by all means, if you think it desirable. We'll manage, won't we, Linnie?"

The child opened her eyes and gravely nodded.

"Linnie not want *her*," she said, emphasising the pronoun, pointing her little fat finger and treating Harriott to a baby scowl.

"And — you are not likely to come down to Gammeridge Gardens yourself?" she faltered.

"Not in the least likely." He gave a low, sceptical laugh; his girlish mouth, under the trim mustache, set grimly.

"Good-by."

She was still lingering by the open door. He roofed his second house gingerly and then looked up, as if he wondered why she did not go. Her face was working, — nostrils, mouth, and eyelids, — but he had long ago given up studying her various changes of expression.

"Ann will be here presently," she said ironically, and picking at the edge of her veil. "She has taken to coming very often lately. One might imagine her a private detective. Tell her, please, where I have gone — indulge her to that extent."

"Very well. I don't think we must have any more upstairs, Linnie."

He was completely absorbed by the cards and the child. Harriott went out of the flat slowly. Her heart was heavy and bitter. The trains ran badly; she had

nearly an hour's wait at Victoria. She wandered out and walked aimlessly up and down Buckingham Palace Road, staring at the glowing shop windows until her eyes ached. She got back to the station a little late and took her ticket hurriedly. At the booking-office she was jostled by a woman who also wanted a ticket for Mitcham. She was dowdy, middle-aged, and wore a crape veil.

Owen was standing on Mitcham platform. He was astounded at the change in her. They had not met since June, when she had been so flushed and radiant on the return journey: June, when she had cast off her burden and left it, without a regret or a backward glance, in the dull, red house. He did not understand the details of feminine dress, but he was conscious of a full effect. Harriott was slovenly. She looked like a woman on the down grade.

"Why did you telegraph?" she asked breathlessly. "Does the girl Jenkins want her child back?"

"No; she is married."

"Then the father will want it," Harriott persisted, with a strange air of hopefulness.

"It is not the same man," he told her bluntly. "She has never heard anything of him since and never expected to. The husband does not know she has a child."

Harriott flushed before she said quickly:—

"Then there is something the matter with mine. Is it dead?"

"I hope not. I saw it yesterday and it was very ill then."

He purposely turned his face aside. He was so afraid that she would look pleased.

"Do you mean that it is dying?"

She staggered a little, bundling clumsily against the middle-aged woman in the crape veil, who happened to be going into the waiting-room. Her voice was so odd that Owen looked round hastily. He was relieved to find that her eyes were full of tears.

"We must be prepared for that," he told her gently; "Mrs. Kempe has been careless. She neglected a cold, and now the child is down with inflammation of the lungs."

She did not speak to him as they drove along the melancholy road. When they reached Mrs. Kempe's she sprang out and hurried up the path to the door. It was a dry summer. The garden was burnt up by drought. She noticed that the laurels, which had struck her as being so unspeakably dreary when they dripped on that wet June day, were shedding their flat brown leaves on this blazing August one.

As she waited at the door a girl of fourteen or so came round from the back. She was wheeling a mail-cart. A very young baby was propped up inside.

Mrs. Kempe let them in herself.

"I will go straight upstairs," Harriott said directly she was inside the house. She ignored the open parlour door, and, turning to Owen, added hurriedly:—

"Send the man away. I don't know when I shall go back." Mrs. Kempe looked at her before she led the way up the narrow stairs. There was the same insolent smile of assumption on her face that there had been in June, when Harriott had lied and called herself the child's aunt.

Directly she was in the bedroom she took off her hat

and coat, and hung them on a hook behind the door. She wore the settled air of a person who had come to stay. Before she looked at the bed she threw a comprehensive glance round the room. It was very mean and small — the worst back bedroom of the house. There was no grate; a dilapidated roller-blind, in the last stage of rot, hung lop-sided at the window. The child was lying on a camp bedstead covered with old blankets. There was a cup of dirty-looking milk food on a cane-seated chair. Every detail was a stab to Harriott. She contrasted this with the luxury from which she had cast it. She thought with hotter hatred and intolerance than ever of Linnie, the child of chance passion — Linnie the usurper, Linnie who was adored by Dandie. Dandie ought to be here, beside this wretched bed with the stained, greyish blankets.

She looked down at the head on the pillow. Nothing escaped her. She was wrought up to a pitch of noticing everything. The strings were torn from the pillow-slip, and the greasy ticking case showed at one end. She looked up at Mrs. Kempe, who had followed and stood at the other side of the bed — Mrs. Kempe, who had smartened herself with a flounced skirt and a dab of powder on her nose and cheeks; Mrs. Kempe, with the insolent, unbearable smile. Then she flung herself forward, and took the child fiercely in her arms.

"Send that woman away," she whispered, half choking, to Owen, who had followed them upstairs.

When they were alone, she added:—

"She has tried to murder my child! Good God, what a place to leave it in! I was mad that day

when I left it here. I've been sane ever since, and it has nearly killed me."

Owen looked at her helplessly, the old stupid look of devotion strong on his big, fleshy face. He hardly knew her with this agonised glow of maternity in her wild eyes.

"You don't know what I have suffered," she moaned, still holding the child as she crouched on the floor by the low bed. "It has been eating me away. It drove me mad to see Dandie with the other one. Such a lovely, dainty child, and so intelligent — the hateful little thing! Dandie is a fool—he was meant to be a woman. He tastes its food to see if it is sweet enough; he wipes its nose, and carefully works out how many clean pinafores it ought to have a week. And I was being slowly killed all the time, and he never noticed. It set my head on fire to see those two together, and then to think of this"—she looked at the blank, unpleasing face of the child, and at the outline of a deformed body under the blankets.

"*He* never noticed; but women are sharper — when it means the ruin of another woman. She noticed — Ann Chance; I told you about her. She has watched me closely, like a cruel, patient cat. And she has come to the conclusion that I am a secret drunkard. If it would help me, then I'd drink. But nothing helps. Dandie locked away the decanters and looked at the grocer's bills, and — oh, what a blind fool a man is!

"I never sleep properly now. One night last week — it was Wednesday — I got out of bed and nearly killed them both — Dandie and that accursed, shameful little Linnie. I walked from one bed to the other with his

razor in my hand—open. Then something stopped me. I'm not sure whether it was the clock striking, or Dandie turning in the bed, or my horror of cutting my own fingers instead of his throat. The razor is so very, very sharp, and he had it set quite lately.

"My heart has a twist. I am always working up to a tragedy and always just falling short. Do you remember Aunt Megson's party? I told you then that I nearly threw myself out of the window and was stopped by the tricycle-house. How miserable and mad I made myself over that affair!—and she wasn't my mother, after all. That is just it! I am always on the point of something final. I just miss. I never go right through with a thing. I have not gone through with this. A wise woman would not be sitting here. A wise woman would learn to love that other child, if it half killed her. A wise woman would forget. But I never wind up, never finish off. I wonder if I ever shall."

She began to giggle in the old, nervous, silly way, and then she suddenly buried her face in those unsavoury blankets of Mrs. Kempe's and cried as if her heart would break. The rickety camp bed rocked with her sobs. She seemed exhausted by her emotions and by the disjointed confidences which had been half-rambling monologue. "Mine, mine," she murmured, stretching out her hands and feeling the child gently, "and I brought it to this place. I buried it. I thought I did not care: I believed I should forget."

Then she got up, moved the dirty cup, and sat down on the chair, which immediately heeled over slightly with her weight. It had a broken leg. She gave a tight breath as she vigorously mopped her eyes.

"Can't you open the window?" she asked, looking across at the dusty panes, which the August sun turned red. The bed faced the window, and the fierce light was full on the hot face of the child. There was such a cruel lack of thought in this simple placing of the bed—it seemed deliberate callousness. It was eloquent of Mrs. Kempe's attitude. Harriott suddenly stirred herself out of her hysterical grief and remorse.

"Mrs. Kempe has not taken the least care," she said indignantly; "I would be more thoughtful of a dog. The child's eyes were always weak. They cannot stand this strong light; just see how they blink and stream."

She got up and made an impromptu screen with the towel-horse, the dressing-table, and the quilt.

"It has not been kept clean"—she looked piteously at Owen. "She has not changed its linen. There is no bath in the room. The water-jug is empty and full of dust. There is nothing but one slimy sponge and an old towel."

"She has not behaved well," Owen admitted helplessly.

Harriott began to cry again, but very softly and without passion. The tears fell unchecked down her cheeks and on to the backs of her clasped hands.

"You won't leave me to-night?" she said suddenly.

"I cannot possibly stay. There is Polly—and there are my other patients."

"Polly! other patients!" she said dully, as if the existence of other ties, other duties, came as a surprise to her. "Oh, you must stay—you must! It—it may die to-night!"

She looked towards the bed again, where the child,

oblivious of all her agony, was lying in a half-unconscious state.

"I must go," he repeated earnestly. "You and I ought not to be together in the same house for so long. It is not prudent."

She did not see the implication in his words. It never occurred to her, at such a supreme time, that anything she did would be compromising. She thought he simply meant that Dandie might find out he had been deceived. She rather wished that he might. Anything — disgrace, separation, lifelong misery — was better than the anguish of the last three months.

"You must n't leave me," she said again. "It would drive me mad to be here alone. Send some one off with a telegram to Brixton."

She put her hands round his arm and held her face close to his. He seemed to grow flabby and yielding under her touch. She was Harriott — all other claims sank into insignificance.

"Very well," he said quietly, "I will send a telegram."

They settled down to watch through the night. Mrs. Kempe sent up a supper-tray; but neither of them touched the food. The room was very hot, and it was noisy with the laboured breathing of the child. Once Harriott put her finger into the gaping mouth: it was like thrusting her flesh into a hot oven.

The long, hot night! Then dawn, with twittering birds and the little sleepy, chinking sounds of the waking suburbs. Harriott looked out of the window. Owen had fallen asleep — sitting bolt upright, with his chin in a triple fold on his grass-green tie. She thought

how very vulgar-looking and carnal he had become. No doubt it was Polly's influence : Polly and small children and an unbroken succession of those paralysing high teas. She had always been a little contemptuous of him, as a woman will be of a man who is hopelessly in love with her. That was the secret of her devotion to Dandie. He had always been a little cold, had endured her affection with an air of boredom ; had regarded her as little more than an attractive means to an end. It was natural to a man to marry and have children. When the children came, the mother did not count very much — she simply populated. That was his elementary attitude.

She looked out at the open country, which the builder was busily carving up. She watched the workmen go across the fields and she mechanically counted the villas, in various stages of development, which rose red out of the earth. She looked down at Mrs. Kempe's garden. It was uncared for and slovenly, like the house. Everything was suggestive of the lack of ready money, and the lack of heart which follows chronic poverty. There were little pools of water standing soapy and thick on the vegetable bed by the back door, where they had soused slops from the pail. There were the cabbage stumps of last spring decaying in the ground. On a forlorn gooseberry-bush a couple of ragged napkins were spread to dry.

She turned back to the bed and saw with intense relief and delight that the child had fallen asleep. She thought that it did not breathe quite so roughly. She sat down carefully on the rickety chair. It was her child — hers, hers ! She would never leave it again.

She hardly thought of Dandie and the other — although it was six o'clock, and the hour striking might have reminded her of the luxurious flat in Kensington. At six or thereabouts Linnie generally woke and was carried from her cot to the bed. All through that night of waiting and anguish she had scarcely remembered that the child, on whose quick, harsh breath she hung, had a father. It was so peculiarly hers. There was not a suggestion of Dandie in all its poor body. It was hers, hers — the very last of those unwholesome Wickens. Hers! Only hers! She and it — in a dark, still world of their own.

Owen's thick snores disgusted her. She was afraid that they would disturb the child. Instinct told her that this deep sleep was a crisis.

At seven the servant came in softly with a tray of tea and bread and butter. Owen woke up with a vibrating grunt. Harriott turned aside fastidiously to the window as he stretched his limbs and rubbed his coarse face. His attitude was a great deal too domestic. Directly he was well awake he pulled out his watch, took a great, noisy gulp at the tea, and said that now he must really go. He seemed a little sulky and panic-stricken, as if he regretted his weakness in staying. But he looked with relief at the still sleeping child and said that in all probability it would live now — this was all Harriott cared. She was absolutely indifferent to his emotions. She never cared for more than one person at a time — then she was all-reaching. She would have died quite cheerfully, with her perennial, whimsical air of joke in the proceeding — for Dandie once, for her child now. The time had come. Owen had wondered if it

would. Dandie was off his pedestal. She no longer seemed to let him come into her reckoning.

"You must go back. Your husband will wonder what has become of you. The whole business will leak out," Owen said nervously.

He had his coat and gloves on. His tall hat was ready in his hand. He looked ludicrously unbrushed.

"I told him I might stop the night," she said carelessly. "Never mind Dandie: he is nothing to me, nor I to him. He does not care for me any longer. When I gave him that child—that child I took from the gutter—I put a weapon in his hand. He killed our love with it. I was a fool to indulge him. But perhaps it was as well. Dandie always fell a little short. I knew I had a master passion and that Dandie did not satisfy it. Here it is: not Dandie, not any man—here! my own flesh."

"But you must be careful; if not for yourself, then for me," he persisted, looking at her imploringly with his heavy, bunged-up eyes. "There is my position—"

She stopped him with an impatient sweep of her hands.

"How dense you are! I am going to tell Dandie, but I will not mention your name. I give you my honour. Keep your position." There was a sort of mournful, amused contempt in her voice. "I shall hurry back to Kensington as soon as I can. I shall tell Dandie the truth. Perhaps he will come back with me. I half hope he will not; I don't know. My head seems thick and stuffed. Perhaps he will come. And when he sees—this"—she nodded at the child—"he may kill me as we stand together beside the bed. Good-bye."

She put out her hot, vibrating hand, let him just touch it, and then turned away with an air of intolerance. He had been very good, but he was so tiresome and so vulgar. It was a relief to hear the door shut on him. She looked intently at the bed. The child slept as if it would never wake. Its breathing was certainly more easy. She put on her coat and hat, drank a cup of half-cold tea, bit at the bread and butter, and went creeping downstairs.

It was such a hot morning, and there was not a window open! The house smelt—the suffocating, sickening smell of bad air and accumulated dirt. The sitting-room door was ajar. She threw a look in, and thought of June—that wet June day, the day of the funeral—for she had meant it to be the funeral. When she drove away from the house the child had been as positively dead to her as if she had seen earth spaded on to it.

From the kitchen, which was at the end of a dark passage, came the lusty cry of a baby. The door was shut. She gave a little tap. Some one called to her to come in.

Mrs. Kempe was sitting on an old rush-seated chair which had been cut down for nursing. There was another chair in front of her with a red pan of water standing on it. She had twisted a piece of coarse flannel round her waist. The little baby was sprawling naked on it and crying as she rapidly whipped a sponge over him. Harriott looked at it pitifully, with a tenderness which was quite new and which surprised her by its novelty. It was a lovely little baby. She shuddered as she reflected that some woman had abandoned him.

The red pan, half full of cold, curdled water, the bit of sponge and wisp of old huckaback towel, struck her in the same light as the bed facing the window had done. There was deliberate callousness about Mrs Kempe.

"You did not have that child when I was here before," she said mechanically.

Mrs. Kempe looked up curiously from her task of winding a flannel binder.

"No," she said shortly. "It was brought to me — just as you brought yours. Its aunt brought it — just as you did. But the uncle came as well with this one."

Her manner was unmistakable. Harriott flinched under the coarse glance.

"I am going home," she said, "but I shall be back in a few hours. Directly Dr. Owens gives me permission I shall move the child. I don't think you have taken proper care of it."

The look that flashed over Mrs. Kempe's face was very similar to the look that had sometimes flashed across Mrs. Megson's. It was a look that Harriott dreaded, because it always boded what she wearily called "a row." Mrs. Kempe was evidently on the defensive. She scrubbed the harsh huckaback vigorously across the child's plump limbs. Then she powdered it fiercely, until it looked like a little trussed and floured chicken — its legs and arms crooked up and its breastbone well out.

Harriott sat down. She felt dizzy with the heat, the stifling, intangible smell. Her vague eyes rested on the other woman's hard face almost entreatingly, as if she begged her not to stab again.

"When you left the child here," Mrs. Kempe said

relentlessly and with perfect truth, "you did not seem to care what I did with it; but that is the way with aunts, isn't it, my ducky?" She touched the baby's round cheek as she poked its fist through the arm-hole of the long flannel.

Harriott winced and turned deadly, deadly white. That one word "aunt" seemed to her the most eloquent and agonising in the English language.

"It is a poor, afflicted, half-witted thing," Mrs. Kempe went on scathingly, "though you look healthy enough."

She gave her exasperating smile of perfect knowledge. Harriott stumbled up. She was really feeling very sick and queer. She had neither slept nor eaten. There was such an agony behind her and such an ordeal to go through.

"But you are not looking nearly so well as you were," the woman went on calmly, and staring up at the unkempt figure and drawn face; "still, you're healthy enough, I should say. I remarked to my servant the very day you left the child that it was odd that a strong, fine young woman should have a child like that. You can't account for these things."

Harriott opened her stiff lips. She gave a painful gulp; her mouth seemed crammed with sawdust. Mrs. Kempe smiled at her in an easy, conspirator sort of way.

"Don't trouble to deny it," she said; "we are women of the world. Why, this one's mother" — slipping a dingy nightgown over the round, yellow-brown head — "told me everything. It was a most unfortunate story. She is a clergyman's daughter, poor thing! and her father would turn her out of doors if he knew. It was one of the churchwardens —"

"You mustn't—you shall not talk to me like that," Harriott burst out painfully: "I won't be classed with women of that sort. You are quite mistaken: I—I am married. The child—it is quite right. Perhaps I shall bring my husband back with me. I cannot tell you any more than that. Take care of it. I shall only be gone a few hours. I will pay you well, if you'll only be very careful, just for a few hours."

Her wan cheeks suddenly flamed as she passionately tried to vindicate her character. Before Mrs. Kempe recovered from her astonishment at such an outburst, Harriott took a tottering step forward, and with one of her queer, quick impulses kissed the half-naked baby fervently before she hurried out of the room and out of the house.

She reached home a little before twelve. As she went across the hall the servants looked at her curiously. They were sitting in an unusual attitude of idleness in the kitchen, with the door wide open. Linnie came toddling out of the dining-room dragging a dolly almost as big as she was herself. As Harriott approached, Ann darted out and pulled the child back. Then she shut the door with an insolent slam. It was odd that the servants should be sitting idle; odd that Ann should be in the dining-room—she was not usually dressed and out so early. It was more odd still that she should slam the door. But Harriott did not trouble to think or wonder about anything. She was sleepy and hungry and dirty and stupid. She almost staggered into her own room, threw off her outdoor things, and flung herself drowsily across the bed.

CHAPTER XIII

DANDIE was just going out to dinner when Ann hurried in. He looked in bewilderment at the clumsy, lower-middle-class figure. She laughed, throwing off the mantle and the ugly veil which she had worn when she tracked Harriott from Victoria to Mitcham.

"I never would have believed," she said thoughtfully, and looking down at the things which she had flung on the sofa, "that clothes made such a great difference. You didn't know me. They call this thing a dolman" — she held it up. "I looked like a cook in it. I've always maintained that servants had an extra bone somewhere or were a bone short — they are such an extraordinary, cardboard-box sort of shape about the waist and hips. But it is really only a matter of cut — very humiliating, you'll admit, to a woman who prides herself on her figure."

She stretched her long neck and moved her head as she looked in the glass.

Dandie said, in a voice of suspicion and annoyance, —

"What are you driving at?"

"Were you going out?" she asked inconsequently.

"Yes; it's a bit dull here, and Linnie is sleeping beautifully."

He looked very forlorn and miserable.

Ann grew serious, and said softly, "Poor old Daniel!" Then she added abruptly, "Do you remember that day

in Manchester, that day when we went for a long walk, and I —”

“We don’t want to talk about that,” he broke in awkwardly.

“But we do. I am not in the least sensitive — not now; and you are married and out of danger. I might propose to you a dozen times and no harm would be done. Harriott would not care. Of course she has not come home?”

“No; I did not expect her. No doubt her Uncle Megson is worse.”

His face flushed like a girl’s. He did not believe that Harriott was at Gammeridge Gardens.

“Umph! Well, you remember that I asked you to marry me because our fathers had wished it, because it would have been a capital stroke of business to combine our fortunes, and because I liked you. Now, don’t stop me. You declined. It was very humiliating at the time. You had never disobeyed me before. But I have wanted to thank you twenty times for never telling Harriott.”

“How do you know that I have not told her?”

“How do I know! By her treatment of me, of course. You spared me that. And now I am going to do you a good turn. I’m going to open your eyes about Harriott. She does not drink, she hasn’t any debts or any discreditable relations, or any past — so far as I know; but she has a present, and that is much worse. If I married I shouldn’t expect my husband to inquire into my past. A woman has the same right to one as a man, and it’s all in the way of experience. But I’d keep the present clean.”

Dandie, although the bolt was falling at last, and he

felt sure that some ugly revelation concerning Harriott was imminent, smiled as Ann made this declaration about her past. These single women were amusing. Ann was so clean and prim. She picked her fiction, kept to politics, social articles, and advertisements in the daily papers, and altogether turned a blind side to that fierce, unsettled thing which men call Love. Yet she was always throwing out dark hints about her past. This was a favourite and mild form of wickedness with the women at the club.

"We must all own up to an intrigue," Mrs. Ellis confided to Harriott once, with her charming smile. "It gives a fillip to the thing, and if you keep on pretending long enough you grow to believe in it—you have all the excitement without the risk. If we didn't play at being disreputable the club would have the charitable, tea-meeting flavour of an improving Something Association. One wouldn't get the credit of one's subscription."

"A present! What do you mean?" he asked roughly enough. He remembered that Ann had an object in making mischief between him and Harriott.

Even he had wit enough to be on his guard against Ann.

"Don't ask me to be too explicit all at once," she said.

"I only ask you to be quick."

"Well, then, she didn't go to Gammeridge Gardens"—there was an odd look of triumph on her face. "Of course, neither you nor I believed that she would. Directly I left here this afternoon I started for Victoria, on the chance of meeting her. I found her in the Buckingham Palace Road, and I made up my mind, for your

sake, not to lose sight of her. I rushed into a little shop and bought my veil and my — what do they call the thing? — dolman. When I came out she was still hanging about the shop windows, looking so haggard and wild that ever so many people turned round to stare at her. I followed her into the station. She took a ticket for Mitcham. So did I."

Ann paused and waited for Dandie to make some comment. But he did not say a word. He only stared at her savagely. She threw out her hands with a little spasmodic jerk, slipped more forward on the sofa seat, and went on impressively : —

"At Mitcham station she was met by a man — tall, clumsy, big, and very dark. He stuck his lips out — so. He had a dark complexion, blue-black at the cheeks and chin, where he shaves. Have you ever met him? He may be a member of your club: they so often take their husband's dearest friends. He was so dark and thick-lipped that he looked like a redeemed negro. Do you understand?"

It was not very clear, but Dandie understood.

"Go on," he muttered quite savagely. His good-looking, rather vacuous face was grim enough now. He looked at Ann, bird-like and voluble on the sofa, as if he could have found it in him to stab her, and so silence for ever the tongue that was shaming him.

"I followed them in a fly. They drove, and I drove — at a discreet distance behind — to the most desolate-looking house ever built by man. There is nothing to be seen but brown, parched-up, common market gardens, and little half-built red and yellow villas in the distance. I am coming to the worst part. Don't look

at me like that: it is all for your good. A man with dust in his eyes is the most pitiful and ridiculous object on earth. Harriott has managed most cleverly."

Dandie was hardly listening to her. His thoughts rushed back to those evenings of courtship at Gammeridge Gardens. He remembered very vividly the particular evening when he and Owen had walked back together to the latter's house in the main road. He thought of Owen's awkward, unwarrantably impertinent warning, and saw light. The fellow evidently had the shreds of decent feeling. He had wished to spare him. He remembered many things—words, glances, references, that had passed between Harriott and the dark young Brixton doctor. He seemed to remember, now he came to think of it, that Owen had looked very queer on the wedding-day. Had Harriott, all through, been Owen's— He dared not finish the thought. He would not, because he chivalrously thought of Linnie. Harriott was Linnie's mother.

"There is a baby," Ann said, bending farther forward still, and speaking in a thick whisper. "When Harriott had gone into the house I interviewed the nurse-maid, who had the child in a mail-cart. It is only a few months old. I asked the age, and it—you know how women piece dates together—just fits in. That child was born when you were in America. If I had not gone for that long visit to Leeds, she never would have escaped me. But I went away, and I was gone for months. When I returned she had just come from the country—Devonshire, so she *said*. I never saw a woman look more pulled down and guilty."

Dandie got up, and began to walk jerkily about the

room. He had on new boots; they creaked across the floor. He stopped suddenly full in front of Ann.

"It's a lie," he said vigorously, "and I won't believe it. Harriott is as straight as a die."

"Then come and see for yourself." Ann stood up, too, and faced him angrily. "Is it my fault? Aren't you glad to have your eyes opened? Don't take my word for anything. Come down to the house now. There is plenty of time, and they are sure to be there until the morning."

Dandie had walked on again. He was half-way round the table. When she said that he stood still, with the sharp, final air of a man who had been shot. Then, pulling himself together, he paced on again.

"She calls herself its aunt," continued Ann, in her clear voice of revelation. "The nurse-girl—she was a most wise, depraved little imp of fifteen or so—said with a leer that they always do. She seemed to have a full acquaintance with that side of life. This Mrs. Kempe, who has the house, takes in nurse-children. There is another one there, about Linnie's age, I gathered. It is an idiot. That has an aunt, too. Now you had better come down to the house and find out for yourself. There are plenty of trains, and you will just catch her nicely."

"I don't want to catch her," he said insultingly. "I leave all the dirty work of spying to you, Ann. I'm not going near the house. I shall wait until she comes home, and hear the truth from her own mouth."

Ann took up the dolman; then threw it down again. "Give that to one of the maids," she said, indicating it with a flourish of her finger; "I shall be warm enough."

Then she went to the door, and, with the handle in her hand, threw a few parting words at him.

"You are a great fool," she said deliberately. "I have taken all my trouble for nothing. Of course she will be prepared with some plausible story—they will make it up together and laugh at you as they do it. You are an easy-going, gullible idiot. Still, we have known each other all our lives; you were half in love with me for years before you ever met her, and I will come round early in the morning in case you want me."

When Dandie was alone he dropped down like a log into the deep stuffed chair by the fire. He thought of Harriott. He had been sitting in that very chair the night in Oxford Street when she had stumbingly told him that Linnie was coming. He thought of Harriott—from that first day when he had, contrary to his convictions, spoken to her in the omnibus, until yesterday, which was perhaps the last day, when she had stood, faltering and flushing, on the rug, with the telegram in her shaking hand and the lie about her Uncle Megson on her false lips. For he believed Ann's story. She might have elaborated a little, but the one important thing was no doubt true: Harriott had broken her marriage vow. Harriott had brought disgrace on him and on Linnie. He would find out the truth when she came back. He would probe the thing to the very bottom; he wouldn't be gulled by any flimsy, concocted story.

When he went to bed he looked in at Linnie. His attitude as he bent over the cot was that of a man at a shrine. He felt in his simple way that there was something inexpressible and sacred about this little white rose-leaf of humanity. He stared at her a long time

the water standing in his eyes. He saw his own face on the pillow. She was just like him. When he was a child he used to double his fists up like that ; his mother had mentioned it once. He took Linnie up in his arms at last and put her in his own bed. She woke up and cried when the cold sheets touched her, but he crooned her off again with the patience of a woman. She cuddled on his arm all night. He did not sleep a wink, but lay staring, with dry, burning eyes, round the room. It looked very bare and neat without Harriott. She was slovenly over her undressing. Every chair had held some bit of clothing, the dressing-table was always littered with lace and hairpins, brushes, brooches, and tortoise-shell combs.

CHAPTER XIV

HARRIOTT was half asleep, just as she had thrown herself in a heap across the bed, when Dandie shook her shoulder. She sprang up. For a moment they did not speak: each surveyed the other with wild, doubting eyes.

He said at last, very quietly: "I want you to tell me where you spent the night. Ann says you were with Dr. Owens at a house near Mitcham. Is that true?"

"It is quite true," she admitted in a low voice, and backing away from his angry face. "Did — did Ann tell you anything more?" she added almost inaudibly.

"She told me everything. She told me about the child that you are hiding down there."

"You know! Oh, Dandie! Dandie dear, forgive me. I was going to tell you myself. I could not bear it any longer. Why did Ann spy on me? She has no right. How did she find out? I would have told you myself."

"It does not matter much who tells me," he said, with a strange, short laugh, and looking at her oddly as she stood there shaking and helplessly twisting her hands about. "It is true. That is all I want to know. Ann wished me to go down to Mitcham last night and surprise you. But I would not; I gave you every chance. So it is true."

He sat down on the bed in a crushed, tired attitude. The burning tears came up and stood in Harriott's

heavy, ringed eyes. For the moment he was the old Dandie again — Dandie of their courting days, Dandie before they had a child. Dear, handsome, foolish old Dandie! She dropped down on the floor beside him crying helplessly, and trying to rest her head against his knee.

"Dandie, I meant to tell you. How did Ann find out? We thought, Owen and I, that we were so careful. I tried so hard to forget. I have not seen him since last June: we have not even written since you came back to England. But I had to meet him at Mitcham yesterday. The child was ill. You don't blame me for going to my own child? I am so sorry that I deceived you. But it was such a temptation, and you were away. When one loves a man so much — when that man is all the world —"

"Stop!" He sprang up from the bed, tearing off her clinging arms, pushing her roughly away when she tried to rise and hold him. "I've heard enough — too much. I always knew that man Owens was a villain."

"I meant to tell you. The burden of it has nearly killed me. I meant to tell you. Oh, Dandie, don't hurt me like that!"

"You meant to tell me! As if that would make any difference!" He pushed her so roughly that she fell back in a heap on the floor, stunned and aching. "You meant to tell me!" He was striding up and down the room, between the bed that they had slept in together for years, and the dressing-table where he had so often watched her do her hair and perform a dozen pretty vanities. She crept up and sat at the edge of the bed, looking at his changed face with terror. He wasn't

Dandie—polite, languid, exquisitely gentle Dandie any more. She was half afraid that he meant to kill her. She kept moaning out at intervals: "I'm very sorry. But when a women loves a man she stops at nothing."

"At nothing, at nothing!"

Her weak, tired voice lashed him into fury. She was shameless to the core. She even tried to palliate. He turned round sharply, looked at her with indescribable contempt, and threw at her a string of coarse words. She was startled more than pained. When they were in Oxford Street the men in the street at the back had used those words to their women. But Dandie! Dandie—whose worst expletive was "bother"!

The dreadful words fell like stones on her head. She crouched on the gay quilt, staring at him blankly, with a sleepy, stupid air. She looked half imbecile, as she sometimes did when very deeply moved. Her big, pale eyes were wide and vacant. They seemed to urge him on to greater violence. He took a stride forward and struck her cruelly on the face. She did not resent. Her stupid expression did not lift. She seemed to be waiting foolishly for another blow. His hand dropped. For the first time in his life he experienced mad, murderous passion. He could have kicked her—this woman who had ruined his life, who was indifferent to the child of her marriage because she had another of shameful birth hidden away. He could have killed her, but a man cannot keep on striking a fool, a dead, dumb thing, who does not resent, who does not even seem to feel. There was an angry, ridged weal rising on her cheek. She never even raised her hand to it. He went to the door. He looked for the last time at her tired,

dead-white face, on which the marks of his fingers rose like a chain of red hills.

"I'm going away," he said at last. His eyes were bloodshot, and he kept licking his parched, swollen lips. "I shan't return until you are out of the flat. Do you understand? Do what you like; go where you like. Take that child with you. Don't let me ever see you or it, or I shall kill you."

He had gone away. She looked at the shut door and gave a little dry sob. Then she fell back, stiff and shivering, on the bed again. She lay there for a long time, half awake, and listening to the sounds outside the door. She was surprised at her own curious, dull indifference now all was over. Dandie knew. Well, she would not have to keep up a false front any longer, she would not have to endure that hateful, basely born Linnie. Dandie knew. It was over. The one thing that thrilled her ever so slightly was the thought of that child down at Mitcham. Her child! The child that she was going to live for in future, the child to whom she was going to make reparation. She had cursed it with life; she was going to do all that was possible—give it the remnant of her own.

She thought the whole position out quite calmly as outside the door the servants scrooped boxes and clattered crockery, and Linnie chattered and cried. She had not said half what she had meant to say to Dandie. She might have made out a better case. It had not been possible. He had been so fiercely unforgiving. Her lip curled. His keen paternal sensations did not amount to so much, after all. He would not forgive his own child for being an idiot.

Once she heard Ann laugh gently; there were various little stealthy sounds outside her door. But she kept still. She never even troubled to rise and lock it.

It was as well, for Dandie came in a minute or so later for his clothes and his portmanteau. He looked a trifle stiff and sheepish, as if he felt conscious of the ludicrous drop from tragedy to commonplace involved in his reappearance. It was doing violence to all dramatic ethics. Harriott lifted herself on her elbow and tried to break out into vehement self-defence. But the relentless look in his eyes stilled and sobered her. She huddled back on the bed again, laying her tingling face on the cool linen of the pillow-case.

She watched him stuff his clothes in — very badly folded and with a reckless disregard of corners. Then he got up from the floor, where he had spread out the portmanteau, and began to forage round for sundries — sponge-bag, razors, brushes, and so on. When everything was in the portmanteau, he shut it with an effort. As he lifted it and went towards the door, Harriott once more tried to speak. She sat bolt upright on the bed, looking wild and miserable, with her loose hair, tired eyes, and yellow-tinted skin. She said, in a thick, desperate voice:—

“Dandie, wait a little! Dandie, do listen! Oh, Dandie! Think of everything — of all our happy times together. Don’t send me away, dear! Dandie, Dandie — ”

She slipped off the bed as he went steadily towards the door. She scrambled across the room, hardly feeling her feet beneath her, and tried to catch at his coat.

But she was too late. He opened the door and let it slam to with a furious rattle.

She crept back to the bed — numb, dumb, and shivering. She heard Ann and one of the maids go into the dressing-room, which had a second door leading into the passage. They were hurriedly packing up Linnie's clothes. She tried to remember if her box was locked: the black trunk which she and Mrs. Megson had bought in Clapham Road a little before her marriage; the box where her badly cut wedding outfit was folded away almost as good as new; the box where, right at the bottom, was crushed the little red coat trimmed with rabbit-skin and the greasy red bonnet with the extravagant frills. That little common coat and bonnet told Linnie's story. She had often ached to take them out and hold them up before Dandie, and had always just fallen short. It was as she had said hysterically to Owen the night before — she always fell short.

Had she locked the black trunk, or was Ann rifling it at that moment? She heard a low, derisive laugh. Perhaps it was at her Brixton hats. Well, it did not matter. Everything was over — tied together, ticketed. Her future — grey and worse than alone — spread out before her like a sad, dead heath. Dandie knew. She supposed he meant to keep Linnie and call her his own because she was lovely and intelligent. So much for the affection of a father! The blood bubbled and surged in her head when she thought of their own child — her child and Dandie's — lying passive on that wretched camp bed in the house near Mitcham. For it was his child, although she had dealt it such a heritage of pain and disfigurement. Her new-born love for

it waxed fiercer than ever. She must get back. Mrs. Kempe might be neglecting it, might be deliberately killing it while she was away.

She heard them call the hall porter upstairs. Then she heard a harsh scrooping over the boards as they dragged the luggage out. Some one whistled for a cab; Linnie's little feet pattered by the door. Ann called out fussily, —

“Where *did* I put my umbrella?”

Then the door banged and there was silence, except for a subdued, exciting gossiping going on in the kitchen, where the cook and the housemaid, who had evidently been left on board wages, were discussing the position.

Harriott got up. Her limbs were stiff and heavy. She drew aside the short muslin blind and looked down at the street, on which the sun fell hotly. The cab was piled with luggage. She saw them all get in. Ann, very fresh and dainty as usual, with an elaborate summer gown, Linnie dressed in white. She was such a beautiful, healthy-looking little thing that more than one woman who passed turned around to smile at her. Dandie was the last. The wide, stupid blue eyes peering out from the muslin curtain stared down at him hungrily as if on the chance of a last look. But he never raised his head. She saw him step into the cab — immaculate Dandie, with his grey trousers and frock-coat, his sleek silk hat and a tea rose in his buttonhole. Ann had bought it in the High Street that very morning. They rattled off and turned the corner. It was over. Dandie knew.

She made a dawdling, exhaustive toilet, and when that was finished she ate her lunch greedily.

Then she began to pack. The dressing-room was littered with screws of paper and ends of string. They had taken the eider-down from the cot and swept the shelf on the wall of all the penny and sixpenny toys which Dandie used to bring home in such reckless profusion. But her black box was there untouched. She raised the lid and took the things out one by one. When she came to the red coat and bonnet she turned them carefully about in her quivering hands. What should she do with them? She hated them violently—inanimate bits of wool and dyed skin. She looked at the coarse lining and long stitches. They were painfully cheap things, bought with painfully scraped and hoarded shillings by the girl Jenkins. She thought that she would leave them behind in a parcel for Dandie, or that she would burn them. It seemed to her that they were important, almost human. They formed a link. They ought to have a dramatic ending. But when the housemaid came smoothly in to ask if she could be of any help, she said casually:—

“I think you have a little niece, Smith. Would these things fit her?”

The girl thanked her and took them, seeming rather surprised and disappointed at the quality, and giving a stealthy look at the red, rising mark of a man’s hand on her mistress’s aged and tragic face.

She packed all her Brixton clothes very carefully. She would want them. She would only have thirty-five pounds a year to live on. But she had a twenty-pound note put away somewhere. That would pay Mrs. Kempe and give her a start.

When the clothes were all packed she went round the

flat solemnly, with dry eyes and constant tremor of her weak mouth and her long, thin nose. It was very odd to think that she was going to leave it—for ever and for ever and for ever. Every little bit of furniture had a history—some tender figment connected with Dandie was wrapped round every cushion and every chair or table leg. She sat down on the blue sofa and let her thoughts drift back to that day when they had furnished and when she had told him to remember that then, at least, she had been perfectly happy. Would he remember? Not he. That was not the way of a man. Directly she forced her way into his thoughts, he would relentlessly turn her out. But there was a feeble comfort in thinking that he would have to think of her sometimes in spite of himself. You can't live with a person for years, and then wipe all memory out by one mad fit of passion.

She went slowly round and round touching the things, taking up this bit of embroidery or that bit of china.

She wandered into the nursery and looked at the chair, the toys. She had bought a great many of them for her own child, who had never touched them. The mechanical ones were nearly all broken by Linnie's small, clumsy hands. The gorgeous doll that she had pacified the child with the day after she took her from her mother was lying headless in a corner with only patches of a blue satin gown fluttering on its sawdust body. On the table was the pack of cards with which Dandie had been building houses yesterday. Was it only yesterday? She gathered them up and carried them away with her to the big gaping box in the dressing-room. She wanted something to remind her of

Dandie. But it ought to be something purely personal — something that was all Dandie, something prior to Linnie, the impostor. He had taken away most of his belongings, and the two short drawers which were sacred to his ties and so on were locked. She took a key from her own bunch and found that it fitted. The first drawer was full of half-soiled neckties, just tossed in anyhow. The other had cuffs, sleeve-links, and various masculine vanities. But at the back was a leather case. It was tucked out of sight. He would not miss it. She knew what it was. She unhitched the little brass clasp and lifted the lid. A plain crucifix was inside. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears as she looked at the nailed body of Christ — just as her mother, an hour or so before her birth, had looked with morbid piety at the plaster Christ on the ledge at the Five Yew. Then she laughed mournfully, remembering what she had once so lightly said to Dandie — that religion was a sedative. She would take the crucifix. It had been Dandie's mother's, and had comforted her, so he said, when she lost a baby boy with diphtheritic croup. She slipped it into the box, with the other things — perhaps it would comfort *her*, too.

Her thoughts ran on quite naturally to the little prayer-book which they had bought that day in Oxford Street, when the September sun was shining and the September air had been so crisp and cold, like menthol on her face. That would be a memory, too — that, and the cards, and the worn leather case might help her in her hour of need.

She had to hunt for the smart prayer-book. Her Sundays of church-going had been few. But she found

it at last, in a box of limp torn veils and gloves with open finger-tips. Last of all, with an unusual touch of practicality, she found the twenty-pound note, and then everything was ready. She made the two women in the kitchen cord the boxes while she wrote the labels. It seemed very odd to write, "Care of Mrs. Kempe, The Laurels, Mitcham." But then everything was odd — the last twenty-four hours had been a nightmare.

As she drove by Kensington Gardens they were white with perambulators and children's frocks. It was August, but London is never empty. There was a sprinkle of smart women on the pavements. She looked at them with eyes of kinship. To-morrow she would have no part with them. That page of her life was over. It seemed odd again, to reflect that she would never more ascend smoothly to the club in the lift. What a story Ann would weave to the members!

CHAPTER XV

"It sounds a very nice little house," said Harriott, reading from the advertisement for the twentieth time. "Do you advise me to look at it?"

"If you have quite made up your mind to go into the country. But I think it is a mistake."

Owen looked at her with the old eyes of hopeless devotion. They were sitting in Mrs. Kempe's drawing-room. He had just concluded his visit to the child. Through the wall the infant of the churchwarden and the clergyman's daughter was crying in a weary monotone.

"That poor little thing is always crying," said Harriott, with the flicker of a shadow on her colourless face. "Yes, I have quite decided. There is nothing else to be done. It will be good for the child, good for me, and it will be cheap. In the country I can manage on thirty-five pounds a year; in London I should starve."

"Thirty-five pounds a year! You cannot possibly do it," said Owen, emphatically. "Let me go to your husband."

"I should not dream of your going," she cried, with much vigour. "It would not be of the least use. Besides, my mind is quite made up. I am looking forward to a country life."

She had never found courage to tell him that Dandie

knew of his share in the plot. She had very often wondered—in quiet, sleepless hours, or long grey afternoons—how Ann had found out everything. But then Ann was so clever and relentless. Instinct had told her, from the first moment of their meeting, that Ann was an enemy. The mere vulgar conclusion that Ann had jumped at never suggested itself to her. When Dandie had said that he knew all she took it for granted that he knew the truth. So they had parted on a misunderstanding.

She jumped up and looked at her watch.

“I will go to-day. Look up the trains while I speak to Mrs. Kempe. She will be careful of the child if she is paid for it, just as she would kill it if she were paid for it. She is absolutely complaisant. We misunderstood each other at the start, that is all.”

She gave her little careless shrug and bitter smile before she hurried away.

When she came back she had her outdoor things on.

“It is sleeping quite nicely,” she said, doing up the last button of her glove. The unconscious way in which she always called her child “it” made Owen wretched for her. “Shall I really be able to move it from this place in a week?”

“If things go well. There is a train at eleven something.” He fluttered the pages of the time-table with his great, coarse hands, so as to look up the odd minutes again. “Will that do?”

“Yes, if we can catch it. I’ve settled everything with Mrs. Kempe. Where is your hat?”

“You must give me your frank opinion on the cottage,” she said, as they went briskly along the straight

road. "You must go and poke about at the drains, and things of that sort."

He flushed uncomfortably before he said, —

"I cannot come with you, Harriott."

"But you must. I have never settled anything for myself in my life. You are committing me to typhoid or some horrible thing. What do I know about sanitation? Uncle Megson always used to say that country cottages were death-traps. I shall take a death-trap, artfully covered with roses, and the burden of it will be on you."

"I cannot come. I am very sorry. But there is my practice. I've been neglecting it lately, leaving everything to the assistant. And I promised Polly that I would be back to dinner, without fail. She was very much set on it. I think she has got a calf's head, which she knows I am particularly fond of," he said simply.

"Well, if you are going to let me risk my life for a calf's head —" she began.

"Be serious, Harriott. I should like to come, but —"

"There is Polly, of course," she said scornfully.

"Precisely; there is Polly, to say nothing of the practice. I've been a bit anxious about her," he went on confidentially. "She has never picked up flesh properly since the twins were born. I want her to go away for a change, but she will not hear of weaning them, or of leaving me. She is a very devoted wife and mother. She does her duty thoroughly."

"I suppose so," admitted Harriott, tartly. "But I hate people who do their duty; they make themselves so unpleasant in the doing of it." She turned her face aside, and looked steadily at two new villas close to the road, which had only half risen from the ground when

she came to stay at Mitcham, and which were occupied now.

They grew dim and wobbled unsteadily before her watery eyes. She had the greatest possible contempt both for Owen and Polly, but their stolid family life, including the twins, of which they were so idiotically proud, made her own failure more glaring, more hard to bear. A little sob came up in her throat. Perhaps if fate had only allowed her and Dandie to settle down to high teas and twins—she burst out giggling at the absurdity of the idea.

“Why are twins so inevitably comic?” she asked irrelevantly, looking up with wet, dancing eyes at Owen’s astonished face. “It is difficult to say why, isn’t it?”

“I don’t see that they are,” he returned rather huffily. “Of course they are a great trouble when they are very young. But by-and-by, when we can take them out together, dressed exactly alike,—they are both girls,—we shall be very proud of them.”

“Of course you will,” she returned soothingly, and added, “It was only one of my mad ideas. Don’t look so offended; personal dignity is peculiar to the feeble-minded.”

“I wish you would go and see Polly,” he said with inspiration, “it would do her good. If she has anything on her mind she might tell you.”

They were at the station. Harriott’s train was signalled.

“I’ll go to-morrow,” she promised impulsively. “Get me a return ticket to Pidgwick; wasn’t it Pidgwick?”

At Pidgwick the porter came along the line calling

out deliberately, "Pidgwick! Pidgwick!" Harriott and Owen had said "Pidgik," in the short, snappy Cockney tongue, but the Sussex man said sonorously, "Pidgwick" — just as it was spelt, and with an idle lingering on the "wick."

She got a dogcart from the grocer's across the way — it was four shillings for a fly to Ash Hollow and only half a crown for a dogcart. The far-stretching agricultural country appealed to her very strongly. She was smarting, and it touched her soothingly like an unguent. There was nothing blatantly pretty about it, and this pleased her all the more. She hated conscious beauty in nature, the kind of scenery that was always crying out to be admired. The big fields, the neatly clipped hedges — invariably close to the road, because generations of agriculturists had frugally sneaked the waste whenever they saw an opportunity for land-grabbing — were restful. Red cows stared at her reflectively over "heave gates," or labourers, stirred out of habitual torpor by the sight of a stranger, straightened their bent backs and leaned on their spades. A couple of children ran out from a cottage. She turned her eyes away; she could not bear the sight of sturdy children. There were very few houses — an old farm or so, square cottages with red roofs and brilliant patches of garden — one had a great double dahlia growing in an empty pigsty. The flame-coloured, rosette-like flowers glowed in the October sunshine. There was no attempt at the picturesque, no painful struggle for it. All the beauty was accidental and unheeded. Life was serious with these people and had been for hundreds of years. They lived on the land, by the land — they tore their

bread out of the grudging bosom of the brown earth. Flat, wide stretches of grass and grain, watched over and guarded by the hills: they touched her with a beautiful sense of peace, of sloth, of smoothness, and frugality. Here was nothing whimsical, no change except in those ever changing hills, which varied with every mood of the sun. It seemed to her that she was safe in the circle of those hills; they shut her off. She would begin over again — she and the child.

There was a sharp turn of the road. The fly was driving through one of those sordid little hamlets which are patched coarsely throughout all rustic England. She saw new cottages crowding together on the very edge of the road; slips of garden, full of runner beans, and with narrow plants trailing in gross luxuriance over the rubbish heaps. Thin, staring cottages, all bow window, with women gossiping at the doors and children squabbling in the dust. The cart was slowing. Harriott took out her purse and looked at the advertisement which she had cut from the paper: "Genteel Detached Cottage to let. Apply to S. Botting, Ash Hollow, Pidgwick, Sussex."

The fly stopped and the man on the box looked around at her. So this was Ash Hollow. Her heart sank; it was Brixton — on an even meaner scale, with ample vegetation thrown in, and that was all. A middle-aged man came out of one of the cottages and touched his hat to her with an independent air.

"Mr. Botting?" she said interrogatively, and holding out the slip of paper.

"Yes, ma'am; the house to let is a little farther down the road. Drive on to the 'Barberries,' Carter."

She never forgot that slow, conspicuous progress through the hamlet. There were few cottages, comparatively few women, and not so very many children. But it seemed to her a world of mean brick walls and curious eyes. She took in characteristic details of all the people who passed, or who stood under the little rustic porches, staring and gaping. That woman had a strangely aggressive expression — her spectacles gummed closely to her eye, her nose wrinkled, and her mouth upturned. Polly Owens looked like that sometimes. The old man coming slowly along had a solemn independence and dignity in his walk. The other man beside him, with a rough grey head, purple face, and shambling gait, looked as if he would fall to pieces with a touch. He was loosely strung together, like a roughly pinned bodice pattern. She noticed them all — these rustic figures who later on were to become entities to her, part of the programme which was in preparation.

The dogcart stopped again. Mr. Botting came up to the step. Harriott got down awkwardly, still conscious of the battery of eyes. She and the landlord went over the empty house. It was detached certainly, but you could almost stretch your hand from the kitchen window to the house next door. There was a long garden, with a gate at the end leading into a field. The narrow paths were asphalted and the upper windows of the cottages across the way watched jealously. Still it was cheap, and the rooms were fairly large and bright. He assured her it was healthy. It would do — for a time, at any rate.

"I'll take it for a quarter and try," she said, rather haltingly, when the inspection was over and they jostled each other in the mean, dim passage.

The man's face changed.

"I can only let it on a three years' agreement," he returned, with an air of half-insolent firmness.

Harriott was delighted. She had been conscientiously persuading herself that she could live there, but directly there was a prospect of being chained to it for three years she admitted that even three months would have been impossible. To be spied in and out of your house, to be unable even to walk in the back garden without being watched, was one of the many things that had maddened her in Brixton years ago.

"I could not do that," she said, and he instantly opened the front door. He did not attempt to persuade her, to convince her, or to meet her half-way. She learnt later that this surly independence was characteristic of the people. He seemed to her callous to rudeness, but he did not mean it.

She told the man to turn back to the station. When they were about half a mile out of the hamlet he touched his hat and said:—

"If you are looking for a house, ma'am, there's the Five Yew. It's rather rambling and very lonely, but the rent's not much and it's beautiful in summer-time."

"That would be the very place," she said, with instant enthusiasm. "Where is it?"

"A mile or more from here. You go by Barly Bridge: I can't drive you right down; it's a rough road and the ruts are bad for the horse, but you'll find the keeper's wife there. She'll show you over."

They drove on, through the flat green and yellow country—like a brightly coloured Delft plate with the

hills for upstanding rim. The harvest-fields were shorn, and the stubble was like a vast unshaven chin.

They passed an inn, with the crudely painted sign of a sailor creaking gently on its hinges. A church, with the characteristic Sussex steeple, was half hidden by trees; an old red house — beamed, terraced, and with walled gardens — stood in a park. The driver pointed his whip at it.

"That's the Hall," he said. "There's nearly three hundred acres goes with it. It belonged to one family for a sight o' years, so I've heard tell. I don't belong to these parts myself. I come from Hampshire — Liphook way, if sur be as you happen to know it —"

"I don't!" — she was leaning forward trying to catch every word. "What about the family who had that house for so many years?"

"Oh, they come down in the world. They had to sell up — that was a long while back. Major Saint Arthur has it now. No doubt you've heard tell of Major Saint Arthur."

He said it broadly, with weighty deliberation — Saint Arthur, with a strong burring accent on the final syllable. Harriott confessed, with some shame, that she never had. She was looking back at the red house with interest, remembering that her father had belonged to a county family. A county family must mean a house like that, with acres by the hundred, great chimneys, and an encircling wall.

The man flicked lazily at his horse, saying as he did so, "Major Saint Arthur has improved the place wonderful. He's pulled down part of the wall, so as you can see the house from the road, and he's built

greenhouses and new stables, and put in plate-glass windows. He's made a fine place of it has Major Saint Arthur—fit for a gentleman's residence."

They went on and on. The October afternoon grew hotter. It was a perfect day. The cloudless sky, the brilliant autumn tints, filled Harriott with exhilaration. They were still passing the grounds of the Hall. Rooks cawing and wheeling weightily between half-bare elms delighted her. There was something mysterious about those black, garrulous things.

"They must be members of Parliament or of a missionary society," she said to herself, and leaned back, closing her eyes luxuriously and letting the wind blow her hair about.

The cart stopped at a gate, from which a roughly rutted road led through a field.

"You go straight down there," said the driver, "through another field, and you'll see the Five Yew in front of you. Can't miss it—there isn't another house till you get to Leverence, which is a mile or more on through the wood."

She got out, saying that she supposed it would not take long, and that he must wait.

"There's a road," he said, leaning down, "across the fields to the station if you walk back to Barly Bridge. There's no call for you to go through Ash Hollow again. The field-path saves a mile an' a half, and I've got to meet a gent from London by the three train. It's past two now."

She paid him, first getting more explicit directions about the field-path. Then she watched him go rocketing crazily down the road and out of sight. Then she

laughed softly to herself, opened the gate, and began to run like a child over the coarse grass. There was an absolutely savage sense of freedom in being alone, unwatched, with Nature on this ripe, yellow day. She kept to the grass. The road was caked and cracking. The great furrows and holes made in the deep mud last spring had set. There were still blackberries on the hedges — untrimmed, luxuriant hedges, very different to those bordering the roads. Some one, in the early morning, had dropped mushrooms on the grass.

At the end of the second field, as the man had said, she saw the Five Yew lying lonely in the hollow at her feet. She stood still — little dreaming she looked at the house where she had been born, where her parents had died; at the house which held the dark secret of Jane Hawker's death.

The road led steeply down, with great ridged lines of yellow earth and the caked footprints of cattle. There was a pond, half dry, at the bottom. The oak fencing round the Five Yew garden was the same as it had been in her mother Rosalie's time. The five sombre yews at the side had hardly grown; the great barn was only a little more tumble-down. The grey hills were gauze-like in the sun. Harriott almost ran down the slope, her heart singing. She opened the wicket gate and walked up the brick path, admiring the wide flower-borders at each side. Dahlia blooms were heavy and many-tinted, perennial sun-flowers grew like weeds, roses flaunted their autumn blooms, and the scent of mignonette that was a little weedy and past hung on the air.

The spirit of improvement, which is so strong when it comes to old houses, — strong enough sometimes to

improve them off the earth altogether, — had not slipped past the Five Yew. Ground-glass panels had been let in the stout door, small panes of glass had replaced the discoloured lead lights in the windows. But it had not altered very much since that August day when she was carried out, a week-old infant, in Mrs. Gatley's arms. She knocked at the door. There was a cast-iron knocker where in other days you used your knuckles. A woman opened it, a neat woman, thin and sharp and bright, like an unused pin. She had a fresh face, and a lump of cotton-wool in each ear. Harriott explained her business, and was asked to step in. She had to bend her head, because her hat was of the latest fashion, and millinery ran high in the crown that autumn. The Five Yew was arrogant: it insisted on a lowly attitude.

"It's a ramshackle old place," said the neat woman apologetically. She led the way over the house, up crazy stairs, and across bedrooms where the oak flooring sloped steeply or showed frank gaps.

"It wants a lot of putting to rights," she continued, evidently fancying that Harriott was ill-impressed; "but Major Saint Arthur won't spend a penny on it. He's talked of pulling it down; but it lets now and then in summer for a few months. It's furnished, you see, and the rent's low."

Harriott looked at the bed. It was a tent, with blue hangings—the bed she had been born in. There was a patchwork quilt, torn in many places; in one corner of the room stood a slim washstand with blue ware; in another a mean table, with a tiny, dim looking-glass. There was a chair, the rush seat of which looked as if it had been gnawed; on the shelf was an empty medicine-

bottle and a cheap ornament, such as they used to buy at fairs — a man and a woman with arms entwined and grotesque smudges of brilliant colour smeared about their faces and clothing.

The woman took the medicine-bottle off the shelf.

"It's embrocation," she explained. "We're living here until the place lets, and my man suffers so with the brown titus. Do you think you'll take the place? It's poor" — she looked at Harriott's costly dress; "but what can you expect for fifteen pounds a year? Why, the garden pays the rent in good fruit seasons."

Harriott's face lighted.

"Does it really?" she said; "does the garden pay the rent? That is very nice. And did you say that the place belongs to Major St. Arthur?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's part of the Hall estate. When I was a girl the Five Yew was farmed, but Major Saint Arthur has turned all the land into shooting. I can remember six farms hereabouts being pulled down. If you was to walk about the land much you'd see where the houses had been, because they have left the orchard trees."

"The Five Yew. It is a strange name!"

"Five Yew Farm it is by rights; but it was called the Five Yew before my time. It was a public once — you wouldn't think it, to see how lonely it stands now. But there's been a-many houses pulled down, as I tell you. Old Master Jupp, at Ash Hollow, remembers the Five Yew Inn. There used to be steps just behind what's the parlour now: they led down to the cellar. There was a cupboard built into the wall. Major Saint Arthur had it cut out when he improved the place. They used

to call it a bread-and-cheese cupboard — a dirty, black old thing. It was handy to the cellar. Master Jupp would tell you all about it. They do say that hundreds of years ago one of those highwaymen used to hide here.”

Harriott had been listening, with parted mouth and cheeks into which a faint, uncertain pink had crept.

“I’ll take the place,” she said decidedly when the woman stopped. “I should want to come in at once — in a week’s time. Must I go up to the Hall and see Major St. Arthur?”

“Major Saint Arthur is abroad,” the woman told her loftily, “and won’t be back till the pheasant-shooting. But my husband is gamekeeper, and he has the letting of it. If sur be you’ll leave me your name and address he’ll write to you. And then you can write back and send a quarter’s rent in advance and let us know the day you are coming.”

They went slowly down the uneven stairs, Harriott first, the gamekeeper’s wife coming cautiously behind, so as not to tread on the visitor’s long skirt with the silk frill. They went into the parlour, with the long, low window at each end. The grey stones which had floored the room when Harriott was born had been replaced by boards; but the improver, whoever he was, had lost heart when he came to the fireplace, and the open brick hearth with the iron dogs was there still.

“There’s a range in the back room,” the woman explained, seeing Harriott look at the half-charred log which was smouldering, “but my man likes the taste of things cooked by wood.”

They went to the door. It was a dazzling afternoon.

"Your garden is very pretty," said Harriott, already looking at the borders with eyes of possession.

"Yes. We takes a pride in our garden. Last year we had first prize for dahlias and cottage vegetables at the flower show."

She picked a monthly rose and offered it with a little courtesy and an air of true, simple grace.

Harriott tucked it in at her throat.

"The man who drove me here told me the way back to the station through the fields," she said. "But I am very hungry. Is there any shop near? What is the time of the last train back to London?"

"Half-past seven. There is ne'er a shop till you come to Pidgwick. But there's an inn at Barly Bridge, the 'Jolly Tar,' you must have passed it. Mary Camphor, who keeps it, is my husband's first cousin. I'm walking that way myself, and I'll take you the short cut if you'll bide here a bit while I put on my bonnet."

When Harriott said that she would be grateful for this attention, the tidy, talkative gamekeeper's wife slipped away up the rotten oak stairs and left her alone at the open door.

She stood thoughtfully, now looking out at the garden, and now in at the low-pitched room with the stained floor, cheap carpet, and smartly papered walls. The flimsy modern ornaments and draperies which the gamekeeper's wife had set about this ancient, sober room were out of place—grotesque, like bridal satin on the shrivelled shoulders of a grandmother. She looked out at the garden, and at the worn bricked path up which Jane Hawker had walked with her basket of plums. She looked away beyond the barn, across the fields to

the trees which marked the descent to the daffodil copse — little dreaming. Fate, which had brought her back to the house after a quarter of a century, was strong on her. She felt already a strong association with it, a peculiar, affectionately familiar attraction not to be accounted for.

The gamekeeper's wife came down. As they went across the rough fields she volunteered the information that her name was 'Meliar Wade — she added that, if Harriott wished, she would be willing to come to the Five Yew for an occasional day's charing.

They parted at the "Jolly Tar," after Mrs. Wade had introduced her husband's first cousin, Mary Camphor. Harriott had a hearty meal of frizzled bacon, new-laid eggs, and strong tea. Nothing had ever been so nice. She was already quite enthusiastic about life at the Five Yew. It would be new, idyllic. All her shame and misery would be left behind, buried in the fog and smoke of London. She would never be happy again, but she could rest in an atmosphere of chastened peace and security. She had lost Dandie. But what matter! Love was not worth while — one was always in extremes of delight or misery. When she had finished her tea and paid the bill she left the inn. But the train did not go for an hour and a half, and Mrs. Camphor assured her that it was not more than three-quarters of an hour's walk across the fields to the station.

"You ought to go up the hill and look at the church," she said with a hospitable air of doing the honours of the neighbourhood.

Harriott went. The sun was already going to bed. He hung, angry and glowing, over the substantial red

chimneys of the Hall. The air was cool and the sky had turned iron-grey. She pushed open the wooden gate of the churchyard. The little grey church, with the conical steeple, stood in the middle of the tiny, damp burial-ground. She went about aimlessly, trying to decipher the names and dates on old grave-stones. A great many of them went back to the beginning of this century or the end of the last. These generally had an angel outlined in black at the head of the stone. Some were older still, half sunk in the ground and coated with moss and lichen. There were very few new stones: Mrs. Camphor had told her that people were now buried in the big new graveyard two miles away. She saw one, not so old, as age went, here. She read the name and her heart gave a quick thump.

She read the name. It was Heber Wicken. Beneath was the name of Rosalie his wife. They had died within a day of each other. She looked at the dates and made a rapid calculation of her own age. Then she squatted down on the long damp grass by the stone and stared at the two names with morbid fascination. This man, this woman, lying beneath the stone, had been her father and her mother. Why had not Aunt Megson told her the name of the place where she had been born, and where her parents had died?

After a while she got up and wandered about the churchyard again. This time she looked eagerly at every stone, and now and again her expression grew more eager, more astounded. For nearly all the stones bore the name of Wicken. Heber Wicken, Harriott Wicken! They went back for more than a century, but they stopped at the clean, comparatively new stone

under which her parents were lying. She crouched down and tried with her bare fingers to claw off the moss and make certain the dates on the older stones. They were enthralling, these dead-and-dust ancestors, of whose very existence she had half an hour before been ignorant. It was weird to see other Harriott Wickens perpetuated on those stones. Women who had died a hundred years ago and more; women who had died young, much younger than she was, or who had died full of years. Harriott Wickens who had died as children. There were several of these—one had only been two hours old.

The churchyard was quite dark when she went quietly out, feeling afraid and shivering a little at every puff of wind or every rustle of the dry leaves on the trees. She passed the "Jolly Tar." Its lights were yellow, and the red blinds were drawn in the bar-parlour. Labourers were drinking and gossiping in the bar, and taking deep drinks from striped blue mugs. Mary Camphor saw her pass, and cried out in a friendly way, —

"Well, did you see the church?"

Harriott beckoned to her. She came, and they stood together on the triangular patch of grass between the open door and the road, beneath the big oak tree from which the sign hung. Harriott seemed oblivious of the labourers within, in the ruddy light, who were slowly turning from their mugs to stare at her. It was almost dark. The Hall, some distance off, had a dying pillar of flame at its back. She pointed to the substantial chimneys and pointed gables.

"What was the name of the family who had that

house before Major St. Arthur bought it?" she asked quietly.

"Why, Wicken, to be sure," returned Mary Camphor, looking at her rather oddly. "There was Wickens at the Hall for generations. 'Meliar Wade's mother could tell you all about them. Wickens had the Hall for hundreds of years. They're all layin' up in the churchyard now."

"Wicken. Oh, thank you. Good night," said Harriott, politely.

She turned aside and got over the stile into the fields which led to the station. As she went quickly along in the dark she kept turning her head to look at the big, darkening pile of the Hall.

CHAPTER XVI

POLLY kept Harriott waiting in the drawing-room for some time. It was not often opened, except for what was comprehensively called in Brixton an "entertainment." The maid hurriedly put a match to the gas-fire, which smelt slightly and made the air of the room hot and dry. When Polly bustled in at last her face looked longer and more sallow than ever. She wore the faintly aggrieved and peevish expression of your true suburban variety when it is taken by surprise.

"Why didn't you drop me a card to say you were coming?" she asked in her nasal way, and letting her large, dull eyes roam critically over her old friend's hat and gown. "I've often wondered how you were getting on. You went off that evening without leaving your address, so I have not been able to call. And Owen said that you talked of leaving the rooms in Oxford Street."

"I left them a long time ago. In a few days I am going into the country to live. I thought I should like to see you before I went. You don't look well."

Polly made a wry involuntary grimace. She looked as if she were going to cry.

"Twins take it out of you," she said frankly and twisting her face away. "I've nursed them both until last week, when Owen insisted on my giving them a meal of Croon's food in the middle of the night."

She sighed as she added, —

"Come up to the spare room and take off your things."

Harriott consented. She was mildly looking forward to a long, gossiping afternoon. She felt very well disposed towards Polly — now that it was practically certain that they would never meet again.

For she seriously regarded this going to the Five Yew as a reincarnation. She was to begin life afresh. And she had, in the long wakeful night, developed a fine ancestral feeling for the Hall, which, although it was in the hands of an alien now, had belonged to the Wickens for generations.

The two young women went up the stairs, which were very mean and steep in contrast to the size of the front door. The spare room was cold and prim. Harriott put her hat on the dust-sheet which was shrouding the quilt and arranged her hair at the narrow slip of looking-glass in front of the ash wardrobe.

"Owen has gone down to Croydon to see an old patient who used to live in Brixton," Polly said, watching her. "He won't be home until quite late."

"How is he?" asked Harriott, carelessly, keeping her changing face close to the glass and her hands up to her temples busy with straggling hairs.

"About the same as usual" — Polly's voice was curiously listless. "Shall we go upstairs to the nursery? You'd like to see the twins. They weren't born when you were here before."

They were very fat and pasty-looking. Polly showed their legs with a weary sort of maternal pride. Harriott, her weak mouth smiling loosely, was thinking that she had never seen such unpleasing, bolt-eyed little creatures. But they were straight-limbed and intelligent.

The cold lump of misery and hopelessness which rose in her throat at every thought of her own child nearly choked her. Polly's children were coarse and ugly, but they were all clean-born.

They went down into the stiff, stuffy drawing-room, which was overcrowded with cheap ornaments in the draper's bazar style. Polly brought out her work-basket and a striped flannellette undergarment. Her face, as she sat with puckered brows and downward mouth, looked painfully hard and careworn. Harriott, with idle, loosely twisted hands, and her head set with a reckless, spendthrift air against a pale-blue sofa cushion, watched her — feeling curiously envious and scornful. They talked disjointedly of children and housekeeping. Polly dropped little figments of information about people that they had both known in the old days. She asked inquisitively why Harriott never went near the Megsons, and said that Mrs. Megson was loud in her denunciation of her niece. She asked about Dandie, about the child, how often Harriott changed maids, and whether she allowanced them with sugar and butter and gave an evening a week out in addition to alternate Sundays. At four one of the twins was brought downstairs for a meal; at half-past four the other. Harriott was bored and a little disgusted. Yet Polly, with the lusty, hungry babies at her neck, roused a whole host of painful reminiscences. At five they had tea, adjourning to the dining-room, where it was spread out on the square table. After tea the children played "hunt the thimble" while the nurse-maid leisurely finished her meal in the kitchen.

"You can't have nursery meals taken up, can you?" asked Polly, with an intonation of conviction. "It

makes such a lot of work and mess. Granville, give in to your little sister directly. And, Margaret, go and tell nurse that I am waiting for her to take you all upstairs. Mrs. Darnell and I want to be quiet. And tell Eliza that she may turn out the drawing-room fire, for it is only wasting gas and we shall be much more cosy in here."

They were alone at last. The cloth was cleared, the last child had stumped upstairs, the twins were made comfortable and had been taken upstairs, too. Polly poked the dust out of the bottom of the grate and the fire began to burn and twinkle cosily. Then she went back to her flannellette work and idle Harriott took an easy-chair and let her eyes roam vaguely about the room. It was just the same as the Megsons' had been—a cheaper suite, perhaps, as became young married people, but that was all. There was the sideboard, with the cellaret and the dark cavern in the middle, where Polly stuffed the tea-cosy and various odds and ends. There were the light oak chairs with leather seats, and here at her feet was the tessellated hearth and the hard white curb which was so suggestive to an imaginative mind of the coping round a grave. She had her smart, pointed toes stretched out on it, and Polly kept looking up from the flannellette to those daintily shod feet with vexation. She said at last with irrepressible irritation as Harriott slid them along:—

"Don't you find it an awful bother to keep the curbs clean? I'm always telling Owen to take his great, clumsy feet off."

Harriott smiled and tucked hers away docilely under her skirt.

"I ought to be going," she said, in a half-hearted way.

It was time to get back to Mitcham, and Polly was deadily dull. Still, the fire was comfortable, and this was the final incident of the old Brixton life: one lingers over the last page.

"Oh, don't go yet." Polly looked up at the black marble clock on the shelf, and then dropped the flannellette in a heap on her lap. "Won't you wait and see Owen?—although there is no knowing when he will be back from Croydon. In fact"—her manner became defiant and mysterious—"I am not sure that he has gone there at all."

She looked across the hearth so strangely that Harriott said in rather a faint voice, and feeling suddenly guilty:—

"What do you mean? Of course, if he said he was going to —"

With an impulsive air Polly pulled a letter out of her pocket.

"I wasn't going to tell anybody," she said, holding it out. "I haven't even told Mamma. If Papa knew, there would be a shindy. Some wives are always fouling their own nests, aren't they? Still—you read it."

Harriott unfolded the sheet of paper. Directly she did so she saw that the short note was in Ann Chance's handwriting. It was an unsigned, undated note, giving no address. It warned Polly to be on her guard, to watch her husband, and it spoke of a woman living near Mitcham, at a house where Dr. Owens had once spent a night.

"What do you make of it?" asked Polly, looking hard at her old friend's paling, twitching face.

Harriott gave the letter back. She stared rather

wildly round the comfortable, ugly room, as if she were a trapped rat.

"What do *you* make of it?" she queried back helplessly.

"I don't know." Polly put the paper back in her pocket, and clutched at the small striped garment on her knee rather convulsively.

"It's made me miserable," she broke out. "I had it weeks ago, and I've been worrying and wondering. I remember the time when he was away all night—at Croydon! What brutes and liars men are! It has quite upset me, and you know how bad that is when you are nursing. The youngest twin was very queer, poor little thing, and Owen said it was because I would eat beet for supper with the cold meat. I could have given him a very different reason." She curled her long lips and nose into the snarling smile.

"You haven't any idea who it is?"

"Not the least. I was going down to Mitcham—you see the person, whoever it is, gives the name of the house and of the tenant. I put on my things one day last week when Owen was—at Croydon, so he said. I told nurse to feed the twins with Croon's if I wasn't back in time. But when I was half-way to the station I turned round and came home."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, I wasn't going to be such a silly. Of course, if I had gone to the house I should have found out; I should have caught them, and I couldn't decently have taken no notice. That is just how some women make a hash of their prospects—through temper."

"I—I don't understand."

"You *are* thick!" cried poor Polly, irritably. "What would *you* do if you found your husband was going after another woman? I needn't ask — you were always a spitfire. Why, you'd go and find out, as I very nearly did, and then you'd have to divorce him."

"Of course I should; what else could any wife do?" cried Harriott, vehemently. She forgot that Dandie was nothing to her any longer, that she never meant to include him in her plans for the future. At the mere suggestion of his unfaithfulness her old all-sweeping love and jealousy for him turned her hot with indignation.

"I think I should forgive him," she said, in a fierce little whisper, "but I'd kill *her*."

Polly gave her short, unpleasing laugh.

"I don't care much about her. It doesn't matter who it is," she said bitterly; "but what I do care about is my position as a doctor's wife. Why, Owen has one of the best practices in all Brixton. I'm not such a fool as to sacrifice my position. You can't divorce a man for — for — that — alone. You must prove cruelty —"

"You can always make him strike you," suggested Harriott, with a curling lip. "I'd egg a man on to murder me, if I wanted to. And I rather gave you credit for a gift for diplomatic nagging."

"Make him! Who wants to make him?" cried Polly, ignoring the compliment. "I believe that clause about cruelty is put in purposely to defend women. Many a wife would have to divorce her husband if it were not for that. Sometimes it's brought right under your nose, and then you can't decently pretend not to know. But then you can always say that he has never been cruel,

and so you are unable to obtain any redress. I'm sure the man who made cruelty conditional was thinking of wives when he did it."

"But suppose you were sure, you wouldn't overlook it?" asked Harriott, with an air of repugnance. "You wouldn't go on living with your husband, you wouldn't let —"

Polly took up the flannellette: she rarely allowed her emotions to keep her fingers idle. Her hands shook, but her mouth was like a cruel metal line in its firmness.

"Wouldn't I!" she echoed scornfully. "What! sacrifice my position as a doctor's wife? Go home and live on Papa, and have all the neighbours talking about me! I've heard of women doing that, and I call it silly. Perhaps they couldn't help it; perhaps it was stuck under their noses. But" — she gave a short snapping laugh, and threaded her needle steadily — "he won't catch me going to Mitcham. I tell you what I mean to do" — she was setting the stitches savagely — "I'm going to be blind and deaf, but I won't be dumb. I'll go on living with him — *but I'll make it hot for him.*"

Harriott got up to go, with a jerk. These strange ethics of divorce disgusted her.

Polly got up, too, bundling little Margaret's half-finished garment in her arm.

"I wish you'd come and see me sometimes," she said quite piteously. "It would do me good to have a chat. I could let you know how things were going on."

Harriott shook her head and put out her big hand in the flawless glove.

"I shall not be able to," she said; "I am going right away into the country."

Polly looked curious.

"What's the good of burying yourself alive like that?" she demanded sharply. "I hate the country, except for a fortnight in August. Brixton is hot then: still, it's always nice to get back and have a run over to Clapham, or go on the top of the tram to Streatham for a blow. Is your husband going too?"

Harriott wavered. Then she said, with a wide laugh:

"Of course. Good husbands always follow the wife's lead."

Polly tossed her head.

"You're lucky," she said, with a bitter sneer.

"Well, good-by."

"Good-by. I wish you'd stay and see Owen. Are you quite sure you won't have a glass of wine before you go?"

They went towards the door. Before they reached it the nurse-maid came in to say that Granville was to have had a powder, and that there were none in the box upstairs.

"I'll bring one up and give it him myself," said Polly.

She turned to Harriott and added:—

"I never showed you that new photo of my brother Frank, after all. He's taken with his wife—such a plain girl, but very dressy. Her family's got heaps of money. They live in a big house in Linnet Lane. Wait here a bit while I go into the dispensary for the powder."

"I'll come with you if I may," said Harriott, following her along the slippery passage, with the big hat-stand, loaded with little coats and caps and comforters.

She was not in the least curious to see the photo-

graphs of that vulgar Frank Mackay and his wife, but she was in the mood to linger. It was the last page.

The dispensary was long and narrow and dark. It looked out on to the back garden, where vegetation struggled with cats and smuts for existence. Harriott stared at the tiers of bottles on the shelves, and sniffed up the sickly, chemist-shop sort of flavour which hung in the air.

"Owen always keeps the powders for the children made up all ready," said Polly, poking about and craning her long, discoloured neck. "I wish he'd give up dispensing his own medicines. This ought not to have been left out" — she moved a wide-mouthed bottle, with a band marked "Poison" round its middle; "but he has been so busy lately. People are always out of sorts after the holidays. Ah! here they are. Do you mind going back into the dining-room while I give one to Granville?"

She whisked away without waiting for an answer, and Harriott was left in the dispensary alone. She looked about her; at the dirty floor, out of the window at the deplorable square of scratched ground called garden, up at the discoloured ceiling, and round the bottle-laden shelves. There was a mortar, half full of some nauseous mess on a table, with a cigar-stump near, just as Owen had put it down on his last visit. But the thing that attracted her uncertain eyes most was the big-mouthed bottle branded with the word "Poison." There was something malignantly magnetic about it. She took a step and a step — nearer. She lifted her hand and stealthily took out the stopper, smiling all the time at the novelty of the situation. There were so

many dramatic possibilities about that bottle. It was more powerful than the greatest autocrat living. And yet — she smiled more widely — it was in all probability ignobly frittered away in small doses to relieve stomach-ache or clear a skin trouble. One might put very potential things to mean uses.

It was in greyish, ugly powder — very fine and dust-like. She heard the steady jingle of an approaching tram-car, and the sturdy scream of Granville upstairs as he valiantly fought the powder. She put her hand in her pocket and brought out Mrs. Kempe's last bill, which was crumpled in there. She bent over the bottle, smiling still, in a reckless, devil-may-care sort of way. She did not mean to swallow the poison. If she had been thinking of suicide she would never have found courage enough to approach that beckoning bottle. She was happy — in the prospect of a new life, which was unknown and undeveloped, and therefore alluring. But she wanted some of that grey dust in the bottle — that deadly, potential stuff. It was an opportunity — that was all. She was always on the look-out for the unusual. The mere possession of that stuff would give a fillip. She would put it away at the Five Yew. There would be a touch of novelty and whimsicality in the proceeding. Fancy a happy, placid woman in the possession of a packet of poison! For she was going to be happy and placid; she was going to lead the devoted life of a martyr, and that always brought peace. She folded Mrs. Kempe's bill into the shape of a narrow scoop, and slid it into the mouth of the bottle, down until it touched the powder. Then with a gentle jerk of her wrist she let the powder filter into the paper and

carefully drew it up, half full. Then she screwed it together tightly, and slipped it into her pocket, just as Polly opened the nursery-door and said:—

“If you’ll leave off screaming, Granville, you shall have another spoonful of jam without any powder. Give it him in a clean spoon, nurse.”

Harriott flitted back into the dining-room. The fire winked at her knowingly as she subsided, panting and flushed, into the uncomfortable leather chair. But she recovered herself before Polly bustled in carrying a photograph frame.

The week after she went to the Five Yew. Owen saw her off.

“Now I am gone you’ll be able to devote yourself more to Polly,” she said meaningly, as she put the child in a corner of the railway carriage and her bundle of rugs and wraps on the rack overhead.

She did not take Polly’s suspicions and misery very seriously. A woman with such degrading views about marriage deserved to suffer. She wasn’t going to endure the agonies of confession and of questioning and comment, in order to give peace of mind to Polly. Her very lips blanched at the mere thought of her story running all round Brixton on Polly’s sharp tongue.

“Good-by,” she said to Owen when the train was due to start. “It is to be good-by, remember. I don’t suppose I shall ever see you any more. Only if I send, you must come. We’ve arranged that, haven’t we?”

“Good-by”—he gripped her hand until Dandie’s three rings of love and wedlock cut into her fingers.

"Good-by. You are making a mistake. The country will drive you mad."

"The country is going to be my salvation," she said steadily, and looking more radiant than he had seen her look since that June day when she had left her child with Mrs. Kempe. "I feel that I shall be happier at the Five Yew than I have ever been in my life. I am beginning from the very — very start. I cast off places and people. I don't want to see you — I don't want to see anybody. I throw the past far behind me, right into the dark. Good-by."

She was standing up, blocking the window. The child, in its voluminous wraps, and with its heavy, clay-tinted face, was more like a twisted heathen god than ever. But Harriott was radiant, with little lights and shadows flecking her face and lying in her queer eyes. Just before the train moved she said sententiously:—

"You get everything you want in this life if you only wait long enough. I am going to get everything I want—peace, truth, and quiet. Things come if you only wait long enough. You get your heart's desire—or you leave off wanting, which comes to the same thing."

CHAPTER XVII

THERE came for Harriott the time of peace and truth and quiet that she had prophesied. It was a lingering golden autumn. She was new to Nature. She knew nothing of the country; Brixton, the West-end of London, a honeymoon scamper across the Continent, and an occasional month at Margate had made up her life. She was never tired of marvelling at the Five Yew garden: always happening on some new miracle. She did not yet feel the pinch of poverty or the sting of shabby clothes. It was a golden time of languor. She grew used to the burden of that poor foolish child. She loved it, and found it not a cross, but an exquisitely sorrowful and tender martyr's crown.

It was one of those times that you dwell on for the rest of your days: the times that come back and strike your heart—with a stray scent, or a word, or a colour—you don't know why. She took long tramps across the country, rarely touching Ash Hollow, Barly Bridge, or any place where there were houses or people. The only person she ever saw was 'Meliar Wade, who came in three times a week to do the roughest work. You might go for miles across those rough Sussex woods and fields—all sacred to sport—without meeting a creature. She heard the sharp crack of guns as they killed the pheasants, and sheered away for fear of meeting any one. She grew to shrink from people:

the horses and the cattle who grazed on that starved land were the only ones who watched her.

It was autumn. The woods were wild and semi-tropical, with giant thistles, weeds, and grass knee-high; with the barbaric richness of dying leaves. There was a faint sweet smell of death about, as the leaves fell and carpeted the ground and the morning mists saddened them. Rabbits shot across the grass before her feet; sometimes she heard a nervous gliding behind the bushes, as a snake fled. The woods were full of snakes, but she never saw one.

At first she tried to infect the child with her enthusiasm—showing it vivid leaves or purple flowers; filling its loose mouth with blackberries. But it only stared at her with the familiar weary, hopeless look. She used to kiss its poor, stupid face passionately; these were the only moments when she felt anything but the beauty and peace of the world around her. The ripe, yellow autumn stunned her—kept down the pain.

The mornings were cold and white, fine fog falling over everything. She used to look and marvel from her window as she dressed. It was a little window in which the lead lights and greenish dim glass had been left. Once there was a wonderful cobweb hanging at the gate when she ran into the garden—string after string of pearls fit for an empress. The sun, hot as June by ten o'clock, stole it. Sweet, quiet time!—when she never gave a thought to Dandie, to Owen, to Ann—who had helped to ruin her—to Linnie, the lovely little child that she had hated. All the vanities, the vivacity, and excitement of that frivolous life slipped

off her like a garment. She had only two feelings, — love for the child and gratitude to Nature for being so lovely, so full.

One day when she had been walking in the woods, up and down dell, through copse and over clearing, she came to a gate and sat down.

Then she saw that, hanging from a hazel, close to her eyes, was the grotesque, twisted skeleton of a thing. It was a stoat, but she did not know. She knew nothing — neither names of animals, birds, nor flowers. She knew a rose; could guess at a rabbit, as its little tufted tail whisked into the cover, but that was all. The world round the Five Yew was a vague, nameless Paradise.

It was a stoat, which the keeper had hung there as an awful warning to its brethren. She looked beyond and saw another, half decomposed, on the next bush. Its fragments of flesh, moved almost imperceptibly by the wind, made her creep. The child, usually so unseeing, saw, and put out its hand and made the queer noise in its throat which it did when something roused its dull wits. It seemed stirred by a sense of kinship. Harriott got up abruptly and went home feeling cold and depressed. Those dead stoats seemed ominous. As she went she stripped with her free hand the bark which hung loosely on the rough fencing, dividing the cover from the fields. It was a fascinating occupation — pulling off those long, yielding strips of wood, grey outside, moist brown within, and affording a home for swarms of strange, tiny creeping things.

After that day winter seemed to come and cover everything with swift, hopeless gloom. One morning

she looked from her window as usual at the garden, and cried out when she saw the flower-borders. The tall, spreading dahlias, whose red and yellow flowers had been an important ingredient in her scheme of beauty, were black and drooping. The mist was grey, not white, that day. Before noon it dissipated in cold, steady rain. For the first time she could not see the hills, whose moods had been her only book. It was on that day that she took out the crucifix which had once belonged to Dandie's mother, and set it permanently on the rickety dressing-table.

The last chrysanthemum turned brown with frost. Day after day it rained and rained. At night, as she lay in the tent bed, the wind moaned across country and shook the elms opposite and threw itself fiercely against the window, crying to come in. She was alone. Her heart sank. When the weather grew colder she had to buy wood—a sack of cord wood and fifty faggots. The man, after the thrifty fashion of rustics, sold her green wood with the bark on at the price of dry. When it was paid for she realized all at once that she was poor, bitterly poor. She told 'Meliar Wade only to come once a week. At the end of the month she told her not to come at all.

Winter began, the long, dragging winter, the grey, threatening weeks before and after Christmas. She was alone—alone. Not even a letter came from the outside world. Night and day, day and night, she was alone, except for the child, who did not move, who did not grow, who, as she had once passionately said to Owen, *stuck!* Alone! in a dull, wet world, wrapped in by hills and mist, cut off by puddles and ankle-deep mud

and ruts from any contact with humanity. Her fierce love and compassion for her child grew and grew, until it was almost mad in its intensity. All her emotions — exaggerated by the life she led — centralised on this poor, afflicted thing of her own creating.

She used to kneel before the crucifix, staring up at the sorrowful, hanging head with blank, widely opened eyes. She thought that it helped her, until one day the figure, loosened by frequent convulsive kissing, got loose on the cross. Then she put it away in the case. A wobbly Christ of oxidised silver could not comfort. She fell on her knees, her lips stiff and her head dull — praying without word or thought to the great God, who must be somewhere, above the mist, beyond the hills.

And then one day she wrote, not to Dandie, but to his lawyer, just baldly given her address — in case it might be wanted. After that day she never missed going to Ash Hollow for letters. But there was never one. The mud, as she scraped it off her boots after these walks, broke her heart. She was so dainty and had been so lapped in ease since she married Dandie. Her big, babyish tears dropped on the back of the brush as the caked mud flew in a choking cloud about her head and dried her throat.

She did not go to church, — she could not, because of the child, — so no one called. But there was quite a buzz of polite speculation in the neighbourhood of Ash Hollow and Barly Bridge about her. Ladies making afternoon visits asked each other : —

“Did you go to the meet on Wednesday?” or “Have you heard any more about that strange creature at the Five Yew?”

Women whizzing on bicycles, or crammed into governess cars with merry children, passed her on the long straight roads, as she went her daily way to the post-office in the hope of finding letters, or to shop. She was an interesting, perplexing figure, plodding stolidly through the mud between the showers. They made an odd couple — she with her strong, bitter face and fashionable gowns, a little dragged, the child so pitifully unlike any other child. They piqued curiosity. These local people knew only two methods of life: the sleeky prosperous and the hopelessly poor — there was nothing between. In towns there might be a borderland, but not here, where every one knew the personal history and physical constitution of every one else. Old Mrs. Greener's rheumatism, or the scandal concerning Mrs. Povey's new grandchild, formed a pleasing variation to the usual topics of hunting and local concerts. Harriott smacked offensively of the vagabond.

The cottage children only stared at first; when they became familiar they giggled and hooted. Harriott, with her brain on fire, would march steadily on, the child's big head, like lead, across her struggling breast. The very sight of those other children — healthy, brutal urchins who laughed — frenzied her. She was distraught with the thorn at her heart. She would have killed them all, just that this one — *hers* — might look up — a human creature — and know her. But there was never one hint of change or hope in those dull, tortured eyes.

There were days when the weather was too bad even for her, when the pond was swollen to the very fence of the garden, when the rough cattle-track from the pond

to the field above was a long slippery stretch of deep yellow slush. On those days she would stoop over her wood fire, the bellows in her hand, trying to get a blaze and warmth out of the big green logs which hissed and spluttered their gummy sap on the bricks. That fire of oak wood added to her hopelessness.

The management of wood fires is an art, one of those delicate, deep rustic arts which seem so simple, so beneath cultivation to the townsman. It was an art, and she had not learnt it. Stinging smoke puffed out into the room, licking its way under the cotton frill which 'Meliar Wade had left behind her. Harriott, her eyes and nose streaming, and her head heavy, did not know the secret of ramming the wood close to the fireback. 'Meliar Wade had given a few loose hints, but no handbook. She did not know how to arrange the logs, how to use the tongs to chip off the soft, charred edge and so make a blaze. She knew nothing, except that the logs were heavy as she dragged them from the stack outside, that she was shivering and smoke-blinded.

But there are gaps, pauses, in every form of torture. Sometimes, when the wood had been smouldering and drying all day, when the child was sleeping and the lamp was lighted, the witchery, the unaccountable fascination, of that wood fire touched her. She drew her chair up close and set her cold feet flat on the hot bricks and watched the little flames lick their way up that black, wide-throated chimney, and looked with hot, winking eyes into the steady heart of the burning oak. When the log burned through at last it broke in the middle with a little cracking, ticking sound.

She used to read—the flimsiest penny story she

could buy at the shop in Ash Hollow, where they sold papers, tobacco, and sweetmeats. She plunged into a new world of baronets and barmaids; of dukes ten feet high, according to the illustrations, and in perpetual evening dress; of governesses with the perpetual clean collar. Or she played Patience, using the pack of cards with which Dandie had built houses for Linnie. There were many forms of Patience; but she took the simplest. It was almost mechanical: her sad thoughts could run on as she moved the gay bits of cardboard and said, "A queen between two knaves, two diamonds between two spades, and a heart between two hearts." It was pleasant while it lasted — the glowing wood, the dukes, the childish game. It made one forget the day — washing, cleaning, cooking, staggering from the stack to the hearth with those immense logs.

But when she went upstairs and stretched herself in the bed with the blue draperies, horror came back. The nights were often wild, the house stood alone, and every gust of wind found it: wind that madly swung the stays of the casement windows. It never occurred to her to fasten them. She was too unpractical and helpless to try for a remedy. But the creaking of those stays as the wind swung them maddened her, filled her with nameless dread of dark and loneliness, made her think of all the deaths, of all the tragedies and secrets that this old house held in its plastered walls. She imagined many things, but was far, far from the horrid truth — that the tragedy of her own birth had been witnessed by those walls, that the hearth by which she found comfort had seen her father's violent end.

Sometimes the sound of the stays, as they creaked

and groaned, was like the steady hack of a consumptive cough; sometimes like the bony tap of fingers. The wind was different here from what it was anywhere else, so she thought, with her memories of Brixton and London, where the houses stand shoulder to shoulder, and combine to keep it out. The Five Yew was at its mercy. No wind that ever blew was like it. No wind that ever blew had such tragic modulations in its voice. It moaned and shrieked and hooted, wailing through the bare woods and skirling across the fields. She thought that it carried the voices of those dead Wicken women to her, Harriott Wickens who were lying in the little damp churchyard at Barly Bridge; women who, perhaps, had suffered as she was suffering, who were trying to tell her their long-past woes, in the vain hope of comforting her, of reminding her that the end must come to her as it had come to them.

One night she rose in desperation, half dressed, and, candle in hand, went downstairs. There was a timid scuttling of rats before her bare white feet — thrust into old slippers. She had long ago learnt the true significance of that gnawed-looking rush-seated chair by the bed. A pair of eager bright eyes at the turn of the flight made her flinch a little and draw back until the creature whisked out of sight.

The log was flat and grey on the bricks. She took the bellows in her cold hands and coaxed a little flame, her long, light hair falling about her face and straying into her wild eyes. She was afraid — afraid of the wind, of those dead, pitying women who called.

She sat for a long time, gently swelling the bellows, while the fire grew from a feeble spark to a long, angry

red line. When it was quite assured, she dropped the bellows on the bricks and let her head sink into her hands, while the wind raged outside. Then suddenly she thought of the poison which she had taken from Owen's dispensary. She hadn't heart to begin another day. She was so tired. She could not stand it any longer: she had reached her limit.

It was in her workbox, under the tray, still screwed in Mrs. Kempe's bill. She got it out, flattened it on the table beneath the slow light of the candle, and looked at the fine grey dust. She put a moistened finger in at last and tried to carry that finger to her lips. But she was a coward — shirking life and afraid of death. She brushed the finger clean on her dressing-gown, pushed the poison farther back, locked her hands, and set them on the table.

She thought it all out, sitting close to the hearth where her father had sought death without any elaborate thinking at all. Suddenly she swept up the paper and threw it on the smouldering log. She had fallen short, as she always did — had turned a tragedy into a farce. She reflected that suicide was so vulgar, that it would be unbearable to have her story told in the papers — forgetting that she would be outside all hearing, all caring. Also, her clothing was so shabby. It seemed ridiculous — her own mouth twitched at the whimsicality of the thing. Still, it was a grave and insuperable objection. She wouldn't like them to find her in that grubby dressing-gown, with that soiled, split corset — the only one she had. The idea of a suicide being averted by a shabby pair of stays was irresistible. She forgot that she had only a moment before been in such grim, des-

perate earnest. She laughed shrilly and for a long time, drowning the wind and waking the child, who gave its queer cry from the room above. She tore up the stairs and sat all the rest of the night on the rush chair, in an agony of remorse. During those minutes when she had wavered between life and death she had never thought of the child.

It cried all night — usually it was so torpid. But now and then it was seized with attacks of mysterious pain. She held it in her arms until dawn came, every scream turning her sick with pity. She could do nothing. All the doctors had told her that no relief was possible. When morning came she took up her burden as a matter of course — got spray wood and sticks from the stack, and when they burned up added a log. She pumped water, cleaned her shoes, and boiled the kettle for breakfast — all duties which come with ease to the woman who has been trained to them, but which are cruel hardships to those other women whose fingers are soft and clumsy, whose ways are not neat and deft. Harriott muddled: china slipped out of her hands, filth accumulated. She was a torn, smutty scarecrow, from her rough head to her unseemly shoe.

The one bit of colour in that grey winter was the hunting. The men in their red coats, the cheery tooting of the horn, the tearing, white, liver-patched hounds, linked her with humanity, with movement. She used to watch the party dash across the fields and plunge into the copse in the distance. While they were in sight the curse of utter solitude lifted off the house. She used to hold the child up to the window and cry out to it to look at the pretty "bow-wows." She had

grown to speak to it shrilly, in a hard, clear voice, as if by noise she half hoped to beat sense into it.

One morning as she walked to Ash Hollow there was a great commotion in the cottages — women crowding to the house-doors and gesticulating, children running to the garden gates. Old Len Underwood, who had a job of hedging and ditching, jumped up excitedly from his dinner, waving his cap in a frenzied way about his head as he capered on a hillock of filth which he had scooped out of the ditch by many days of labour. Harriott knew all these rustics by name now, knew them to speak to. The woman with the snarling mouth and the spectacles gummed so closely to her eyes was Mrs. Povey. Underwood was the old man with the purple face and shambling body. She said to him rather contemptuously, —

“What is all the fuss about?”

He grinned at her, showing toothless jaws, and mumbled out: —

“Why, it’s the stag. Don’t you see un coming along the road?”

She looked. The air was ringing with hunting cries, with excited voices. The stag came trotting slowly and unconcernedly along the road, a little startled, but not much. It gave her one questioning stare with its eloquent eyes.

The hunting party were grumbling loudly because it was too tame. This was poor sport indeed when the stag wasn’t afraid of the hounds!

At last things began to lift. There were catkins swinging on the hedge-rows, thick, like golden rain; the little intense, scarlet dots of the female-blossom making

minute points of colour. Birds sang in the early morning, primroses opened in sheltered corners. She was on the brink of her first spring in the country, the first spring, which has a delirious freshness and joy, that no following spring brings so completely. Her blood began to stir in her. She was young, strong, and had such a fierce out-of-door instinct. One day when it was sunny and warm she went out alone, locking the child in carefully. She went away with a bounding step, as if a weight was off her shoulders, and, never looking back at the Five Yew, cut across the fields to the dell.

Bitter, sweeping winds had dried the mud a little; she could see the deep foot-marks which the horses of the hunting parties had made. There were little green spikes like grass, only much thicker, springing up all over the ground. She could not step without treading on them. At last she saw that one root was weighted with a heavy bud. These tender, innumerable things were daffodils. She had bought daffodils very often in London. A sudden memory of the corner of Regent Street, and the girls, with their brimming flower-baskets, struck at her as she stood there in the utter silence and solitude of the copse. She looked between the bare bushes, and saw that a man was watching her. It was the under-gamekeeper. He met her gaze with one of impudent familiarity leavened with sheepish deference, because he did not quite understand her. He knew, of course, that she came from the Five Yew.

"Major Saint Arthur don't allow nobody in the woods," he said, grinning and whittling a stick, in an easy, autocratic way.

Harriott stared. This parcelling out of the country

amongst a few was absolutely new to her. She held the Cockney fallacy that the country was free, and would hardly have been more surprised had Major St. Arthur claimed the air.

"But these are not the Hall grounds," she protested: "the Hall is miles away."

"It's all preserved," he returned a little sulkily. "But I don't mind you walking through if sur be you wants to."

She went on, marvelling at her new knowledge, looking at the woods above and around her, and reflecting that once they had belonged to her family. It was odd. The idea of any one — except a farmer — claiming more than the park or garden surrounding their house was distinctly novel — novel and unpleasant. For the young gamekeeper, evidently disposed for conversation, kept a step behind, and spoke now and then, evidently animated by a desire to do the honours.

"There was a murder here once," he said at last, with a wide grin, and pointing the finely whittled stick to a spot.

Harriott stopped, her feet set in the sprouting daffodil-spikes and her face turned towards the fresh, foolish face of the rustic.

"A murder!" she repeated.

"Ay! sure! An' it was never found out who done it," he said with relish. "Jane Hawker was the name of the young person. Her throat was cut — nearly took her head off. That was a matter of twenty-five years or more. If Jane Hawker had lived she'd ha' married my father's brother, Walt Buckhurst. I've often heard old Mis' Gatley talk about it — she's father's second

cousin. But she's bedrid now, and don't seem to take notice of nobody."

"Mrs. Gatley — that is Mrs. Wade's mother?"

"Sure! 'Meliar Wade's daughter and me's keepin' company," he admitted with gawky confidence. "We're all mixed up as you may say over at Barly Bridge. Them as isn't Gatleys is Buckhursts—if they ain't Wades."

Harriott turned back abruptly. The copse was spoiled for her. The gamekeeper followed her out into the open, chatting in a superior, friendly sort of fashion, and telling her that she might come a little later for "daffs" if she liked.

When she reached home the child was sitting exactly as she had left it. She took it up and kissed it wildly, full of remorse because she had permitted herself one free, untrammelled hour.

The next day it was bitterly cold, and driving white sleet tumbled from the moody sky. She sat indoors, blowing at the green wood and looking out despairingly now and then at the dwindling stack. If spring did not come soon she would be fireless.

The day after was warm and sunny. Larks kept rising from the grass as she walked to Ash Hollow. There was nothing from Dandie — there would never be anything from Dandie: he belonged to the past, but there was her half-year's money, and it was very welcome. It seemed a fortune. Spring was in her blood. She turned instinctively towards new clothes. Her boots had long given out; the water soaked in at every step, and chilled her toes until they were like lumps of ice. She would have new boots, the child should have a new

hat. They were both of them shabby, with a tarnished splendid sort of shabbiness. In her Bond Street coat and skirt, hat with battered flowers, and gloves gone through at the fingers she was a tragic wreck.

And she would clean the house. She would have 'Meliar Wade for the day. Instead of going home, she went on to Barly Bridge. 'Meliar dropped a respectful curtsy when she saw her. 'Meliar was one of the few women who had preserved rustic graces. She ushered her into the cottage living-room. It was very low-pitched, with jugs hanging from nails knocked in the beams, a stone floor leaking damp, a window stacked with geraniums, and a modern kitchener. She set a chair. Harriott sat down, disposing the child as easily as she could on her lap.

There was a faint movement and murmur coming from the bed in the sheltered corner by the stove.

"It's only mother," 'Meliar explained deprecatingly: "I have her in here. It's warmer. Old folks do feel the cold, don't they? She was over to Pidgwick with my brother Jim when he was livin' at the Five Yew. But Jim's wife's temper is short as piecrust, so mother come here. She'll be eighty-four come Midsummer. Go and speak to her, ma'am. She can't hear a word, but she likes to be taken notice on. There! they're just like children, ain't they? She's fond of visitors. Miss Saint Arthur come in this afternoon and brought her some new-laid eggs from the home farm."

Harriott went and sat in a crazy chair by the bed. She felt hot and stupid and uncomfortable. 'Meliar was evidently proud of her antique. Harriott knew

that she was expected to talk — and did not know what to say. She had none of the gently snobbish makings of a true lady-bountiful in her. It seemed an impertinence to penetrate into that cottage at all, an insult to sit staring at this venerable piece of human mechanism. Country life was to her a sealed book. She didn't know that the poor expected patronage and were hurt if they did not get it.

The old woman's face was an expressionless parchment of wrinkles. The dull eyes were on her with curious, stony scrutiny. A weak voice piped out irritably, —

“Lift me up, 'Meliar.”

Mrs. Wade put Harriott's child in an arm-chair by the fire and came forward — a trim, spotless figure in a linen apron, and with her black hair tugged back relentlessly from her face.

“She han't asked to be lifted up for days,” she said, slipping her hands under the wasted shoulders. “See her poor arms how thin they are! Take her hand. It's like a bird's claw.”

The hand was lying on the quilt. Harriott took it. The fingers instantly gripped round hers.

'Meliar Wade sat down by the bed and stared at her mother as one stares at a baby — some one else's baby. It was not a sufficiently intent and tender expression to be purely maternal. There was a strong leaven of weariness in it.

“This is the third winter I've had her like this,” she said to Harriott. “It's wearing to a woman with a family, that it is. There's me with my husband and my great sons coming home for a meal at night.

There's the washing and mending. And never a bit of sleep, as you may call sleep. I did think the night before last that she was gone, poor dear. She wants to go. Every night when I puts her tidy she says she hopes it 'ull be the last. Look at her hair"—she gently pushed back the frill of the cap—"as black and soft as mine, and her eighty-four come Midsummer. She's taken to you. Speak to her."

Harriott bent over the bed.

"Are you very ill?" she asked awkwardly.

The muddy eyes stared up, the bird-like fingers gripped more tightly.

"I'm waiting for the Lord to take me," quavered the piping voice.

"That's what she do always say," put in 'Meliar Wade. "Just slip your hand up her nightgown sleeve and feel her poor arm. It's like a little old broom-handle."

Those strange eyes, like tarnished beads set in a skull, were full on Harriott. The cold fingers round her wrist became more lead-like and firm.

"'Meliar, bring me my album."

The daughter went over to a table set against the wall. It held photographs of relations in their best clothes, a cheap glass vase or so, and a few books. She took one and carried it back to the bed.

"What do you want with the album, mother?" she asked loudly, and throwing Harriott a side smile and a toss of the head.

"'Meliar, bring me my album."

"Well, here it is. Shall I open it for you? Do you want to show the lady little Gracie?"

"She was my youngest, ma'am. I lost her two year come Christmas. There, take it, mother, if you will."

The lead-like fingers lifted from Harriott's wrist and fluttered the leaves of the book briskly.

"Now look at her," besought 'Meliar Wade, proudly; "as sharp as a needle when she likes, and her eighty-four come Midsummer. They're nearly all little uns in there. My family—I've had thirteen, to say nothing of them that ought to have come and didn't. Them's the twins she's lookin' at now. And them others"—she stooped over the bed—"belonged to some lady she nursed when she was a young woman."

The hands stopped, the book fell open on the quilt, just beneath the peaked, toothless mouth.

Harriott and the daughter heard the old woman saying softly, as she slowly swung her strange head,—

"S'many little babbies, s'many little babbies."

She seemed bewildered, half afraid, and kept looking rather imploringly from the pictures of those children in the old-fashioned frocks—all sash and stiffening—to Harriott.

When the latter rose to go she twitched her down eagerly by a pull with her fingers and said:—

"You'll come again soon. I'm waitin' for the Lord to take me."

"Yes, I'll come again," Harriott promised.

She went to the door. 'Meliar opened it, and dropping another curtsy prepared to come down the path to the gate.

"Then you will come at seven to-morrow."

"Sure, ma'am; here's a flower for the little un;" she picked a staring pansy which had stood the winter and

tried to put it in the listless hand which had no tenacity. "It don't get on, do it?" she said compassionately. "Then we'll say seven."

Harriott hurried back to the Five Yew. She was thinking all the time of Mrs. Gatley, of the muddy, strange eyes which had stared at her so with such perplexed, persistent cunning, of the foolish smile on that empty mouth, the mouth that kept softly mumbling, —

"S'many little babbies, s'many little babbies."

CHAPTER XVIII

"You *did* ought ter have some fowls here," 'Meliar Wade said.

She had cleared the Five Yew from top to bottom — wiping off the mildew which had spread like a woolly green fungus on the stained boards in the parlour, turning out the low, dim bedroom, sweeping the wash-house clear of all Harriott's dreadful jumble of dirty rags, soap, candle ends, empty tins, and so forth. The wash-house was a big, bricked place, with every necessary for farm life. A stout beam across the raftered roof had a hook on which to hoist the newly killed pig — barely dead, and steaming from his recent scraping. There were two coppers, one for boiling linen and one for boiling pig or poultry food. There was an oven for baking bread by wood, and under the sink was a board. 'Meliar Wade took it out when she swilled the floor, and let the dirty water trickle away into the drain, which emptied itself into the ditch. Cobwebs swung black and grey from the rafters, like half-mourning gauzes swinging from drapers' brass rods. 'Meliar swept down all she could reach with her broom.

"You *did* ought ter have some fowls," she repeated with unusual emphasis, letting down her skirt and rolling up her sacking apron. "I don't know nothin' how Master Towse up at the Bleak is sellin' 'em — he keeps a poultry farm."

She was at the door by now, and she let her eyes roam to the end of the orchard, where there was a fowl-run enclosed with wire and fitted up with perches and a lean-to shed. Harriott followed. Her cheeks began to burn.

"Ought I?" she said, in her weak, half-persuaded way.

"Sure! *I* should. They pay: they costs nothing. You throw 'em in bits. In the morning you bile up potato-peelings, cabbage-stalks, and such—be sure they have a warm breakfast, it makes 'em lay. Middle day throw a handful o' green stuff; at night a handful o' corn. Why, Peter Buckhurst's wife sold her brood of early hatched chicks for eight shillin's the other day. Peter went up to the 'Jolly Tar' and spent every ha'penny of it in one sittin'. Mary Camphor told me so."

"Eight shillings! And then you get eggs as well. I could have raw eggs for the child without buying them."

"*You* could," 'Meliar admitted significantly. "But us poor folk sells 'em."

"Stay just a minute and tell me what I am to do. How am I to begin?"

"You buy a broody hen, and sets her on eggs. Fifteen some do—and it depends on the breed; the Dorkin' can take fifteen—but I always says thirteen is safer."

"A broody hen?" Harriott rucked her brows. "Where am I to get one? Will it cost much?"

"I can let you have one for half a crown—a cross between a Leghorn an' a Minorca," 'Meliar said glibly

— the reason of whose enthusiasm was now made plain. "She's tryin' to set now. But we haven't room for any more chicks. I've doused her in a pail o' water twice, but it don't make no difference: she goes clucking and squatting about jest the same, poor thing. It's natural."

"Half a crown? I'll have her." Harriott took out her purse and laid the coin in 'Meliar's crinkled white palm. "When can you bring her? — to-day?"

"I'll send her along by one of my lads to-morrow mornin': he's workin' across the fields. You won't be out of your bed, but he shall put her in the run; there's roosts there, and nests, and all."

"And I am to give her potatoes in the morning," cried Harriott, marking the meals off on her fingers, "cabbage for dinner, and corn at night?"

"That's about it. They'll eat any bits. She'll want lime; there's some in the run. Throw in your ashes for a dust-bath; that keeps the lice out. See she gits plenty of grit, or you'll have soft-shelled eggs. Some says oyster-shells, but I always cracks up any old shards there may be. You've got a plenty." She looked at the little pile of broken crockery by the wood-stack. "Crack it up small. Once a week you must clean her out—it's fine stuff for the garden."

When she was alone Harriott sat down by the wide-windowed ledge, in the lounging, idle fashion that she loved, and eagerly counted up prospective profits. She was almost happy. The sun shone: it was nearly warm enough to do without a fire. With the half-year's money in her pocket, with a coming gold-mine in that broody hen, she had nothing to dread. She was pos-

sessed by this idea of poultry-keeping. One fowl was going to revolutionise her world.

She rose early next morning and hurried out to the run. The bird was there. It was a heavy, rather aged-looking black thing—evidently an old hand who had hatched generations of chicks. It was pecking up the handful of corn which 'Meliar's son had compassionately scattered.

For the next three or four weeks Harriott yearned over that hen. The night when it finally settled down on the eggs she hardly slept for excitement. During the three weeks of incubation she stole fifty times a day to the run and peeped through the wire at the wooden nest-box in the corner, where the bird sat, her red, round eye watchful and suspicious. If Harriott came too near she ruffled her feathers and made a faint noise of anger.

It was wonderful—this reproduction. She lingered about the nest when she threw in grain. She remembered the time when—it—was coming on the way; remembered the clothes she had bought and how the selection of a perambulator had bothered her. And then, with a sudden sad spasm at her heart—which warmth and sunshine had made so light—she thought of Dandie and the exquisite tenderness on his face when he came into the hushed room on that Sunday morning. She had hardly thought of him all through the winter—the going for letters had been purely mechanical—but the memory of that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday made her eyes swim.

Yet, after all, it was spring, and spring was omnipotent. In the woods primroses and oxlips thrust th

selves through the sodden carpet of rotten leaves; in some places anemones spread like snow. Birds began to build. The air from early morning to dusk was charged with delicious song and passionate twittering.

The woods were active. Oak faggots were tied into bundles. They were taking the bark off the oak. In her walks she saw the great peeled trunks, delicately flesh-coloured, like the thighs of a giant.

Her heart grew so light that one day she imagined the child positively showed signs of intelligence. It must, it should, be intelligent. No living thing could resist the spell of this spring. It was such a magic, tremulous time. New miracles sprang up daily in the wide flower-borders which stretched from the house-door to the wicket-gate.

When she went to Ash Hollow or Barly Bridge she saw the sick, sweet pink of almond blossom and the milk-white bunches of lauristinus in gardens belonging to those whom the rustics comprehensively called "gentry." There was much agitation in these gardens—significant of tennis and tea-parties when the year should be a few months older. She heard, over the boundary hedges or walls, the gay rattle of lawn-mowers or the patient, sharp "clip-clip" of shears. At the Five Yew a flowering currant was blooming bravely, and a daphne was purple and warm by the gate.

One morning Master Jupp came down to know if she would like her garden tidied up. He had a few seed potatoes with him, the "Early Rose" as he specified solemnly. Eighteenpence a day was his demand, two shillings if he had no beer. She let him stay. He took off his coat. It was pretty to watch him dig, turning

up one heavy trench after the other. He complained of the poverty of the soil and suggested a pig as a remedy. He told the personal history and upbringing of his own pig. She must certainly have a pig. The cleanings from the sty "*be sur fine* for the earth."

Next day he brought pea seed, in deference to her genteel taste, and some rather leggy cabbage plants. He set these out very neatly and exactly by means of a line of string tied to two bits of stick. Harriott, from watching, progressed to work. She brought a rusty, heavy spade from the outhouse and started turning up a bare plot near the back door. Master Jupp watched her indulgently; then he showed her his own worn spade, thin at the edge, and polished like silver with constant use.

"Now a little un like this is more fit for a lady like you," he said, speaking loudly because he was almost stone-deaf himself, and speaking indulgently because she did not look exactly the figure for digging, with her incompetent hands clutched round the grease-blackened handle of the tool, and her foot, in the thin-soled, shabby boot, planted with weak determination on the iron. He held it out for her to weigh; it was very light. When he went she bought the spade of him for half a crown — only sixpence more than he had given for it five years before.

She watched him dibble in the cabbages. The constant, monotonous call of the wryneck came from the wood.

"That's the rining bird," he said, straightening his back for a moment.

"The what?"

"The rining bird. He allus comes at the time o' year when they barks the wood — rining we calls it. Don't you hear un saying, 'Peel, peel, peel'?"

"I'll look in every week or so," he promised condescendingly, when the crops were all in. "These peas 'ull want stickin'. Come Club Day you'll put in a few runners maybe. A woman can't look after a garden no sense, 'cept 'tis flowers and such."

But Harriott, left alone, looked after the garden in her own way — doing a great deal of harm with infinite pains and energy. She became enamoured of her shiny, thin-edged spade, made so delicate by labour. She dug and dug, not knowing why, but simply as a vent for her exuberance. The delirium of spring, her first spring, was in her veins.

One morning there was a cheeping in the nest-box. The hen kept rising, rustling her feathers, and clucking in a fury of anticipation. Harriott ran out every five minutes. She was rewarded at last by seeing twelve little soft yellow things gathered about the big, dingy-feathered mother. She hurried indoors, chopped a hard-boiled egg, mixed it with bread-crumbs, and gave it to the chicks. 'Meliar Wade had told her to do this. She looked at each little downy ball lovingly. They were very soft and small, but they were potential things: they were going to make her fortune, going to smooth the roughness of next winter. It was not often that she admitted the certainty of next winter; at all events it was a long way off. Three exquisite seasons stretched between. She began to calculate profits again, magnifying at a bewildering rate. When her head gave out she took a chick into the house in the hollow of her

hand and showed it to the child. She showed the child everything new, half hoping that she might happen on an elixir.

It was propped in the chair just as she had left it. She believed it to be so helpless, so hopeless, that it would have sat there until it died — without a cry — had she deserted it. She stood at the threshold for a moment, looking, yearning — her poor distracted soul rising to her eyes, the little palpitating chick toppling about in the hollow of her quivering hand. It was nearly three years since that Sunday morning in Oxford Street — three years! She looked at the spindled legs, at the baby shoes and socks, at the languid head and senseless face, at eyes which stared blankly past her tender looks. Then she wheeled abruptly round and went into the garden again — bareheaded to the kiss of the sun. She put the chick back, caught up her spade, and dug desperately.

One day a sudden freak possessed her to go to the market town on a market day, when the fare was only sixpence. She had not any money to spend, or at least to spare, but digging temporarily lost charm, and the first excitement of the hen and her chickens had worn off. It was a fine day, too, and she had always a keen sense for an outing. She was in constant need of mental opiates now, although she did not know it. It would keep her sane to jostle for an hour or two with men and women; men and women who did not know, who would not, like the people of Ash Hollow and Barly Bridge, be sympathetic. That insistent rustic sympathetic prying distracted her.

She sang a little, and softly, as she trudged across the

fields to the station. She stopped once in wonder because she had really heart enough left to sing. The supreme might happen — had happened — and she could still sing. It was such a delightful day. The sky was intensely blue. There was a little copse fringing the grounds of the Hall. The birch trees were shot red and violet, of fairy-like texture. Other trees, the names of which she did not know, had red, bursting boughs. They seemed quite angry in their eagerness for spring. Primroses were coy on the floor of the copse. Across the road ploughed earth ran out to the very edge of the hills — earth that was all warm violet and red under the sun. It was a delightful day. She kept on singing — a very vulgar, clever little song, with a bewitching air. She had heard it at a music hall. Dandie had taken her — rather under protest — on one occasion. What a day! There was a belt of vivid green in the distance — probably young turnips — but she did not know or care. Some sheep, with their newly dropped lambs, were hurdled off in another place.

She reached the market town: it was fully a mile from the station. The road was busy, with carts and cattle and heavy-hipped women who had come to shop or to sell their eggs and butter. A few smart young women in flannel shirts and sailor hats shot by on bicycles. Harriott, beginning to feel a little tired and flat, dragged along with the child, in March wind and dust and sun. A man came by with pigs. One, after a series of plaintive puffs and grunts and savage prods from the driver's stick, fell heavily down on the white, wind-driven road, and lay heaving like a great mass of

blubber. There was an instant circle; every one advised and shouted; the women with the baskets stood on the fringe gaping and moving their heads, and opening and shutting their slobbery mouths as if they were latches. A man who was driving by in a yellow gig pulled up. He was a farmer—a red, jolly man, with a leer in his eye—at the service of any woman.

“Kill it, kill it, you fool!” he shouted thickly; “quick, or you’ll lose your meat, man—she’ll die! Han’t anybody got a knife handy? Here, take mine.”

The knife was handed down. The owner of the panting, palpitating sow slit her throat deftly. The blood sprinted out in a blackish-crimson stream. Harriott turned back. She returned to the station and waited for the next train. This murder of a pig—a little in advance—filled her with misery, with exaggerated foreboding. She brought disaster wherever she went.

There were women in the train—facsimiles of the other women who had watched the pig die and who were at that moment trudging along the high road towards the market. One had a child with her. It wore a thick white veil, but thick as it was Harriott could see that the little face behind was scarlet and puffy. The two women—each with her feet set far apart and her bulging basket wedged securely between her knees—were staring stolidly. Harriott pulled her child’s face down until it was buried in the crevice of her neck. She stared fixedly out at the country through which the train slid. She was thinking that if one of those women—one of those big, waddling animals—pitied her, she would open the door and throw herself, with

the child held close to her throat, across the smooth, metal lines. But they did not speak, only stared — an unwavering, unblinking stare. As she brushed by to alight, she heard one of them whisper hoarsely, butting her head inquisitively forward at the same time, "It 'ud be a mercy if God A'mighty was to see fit to take a poor afflicted thing like that to Hissself."

That night she held the child more closely in her strong arms. Darkness was merciful; as her hands strayed softly from head to foot, it was easy to almost believe—just for the sake of the sensation—that it was sweet and straight and sound, like the children of other mothers.

Some days later when she stripped off the nightgown, a bright rash of red pin-prick spots like flea-bites had spread and circled round the child's neck and wrists.

She fed it—with the patent food which it had never outgrown—settled it back in bed, locked the house, and started for Barly Bridge.

She scurried and stumbled across the fields, almost flinging herself across the stiles in her haste. At the wide gate leading out into the road she was stopped by a weary procession of sheep. She looked along the road both ways, and saw nothing but sheep, sheep, sheep, and heard nothing but a persistent, protesting bleat—a long, tearful bleat in every range of sound. They came and came and came—sheep in squadrons, wreathed about with flying clouds of dust, accompanied by pillars of dust. There was a driver at the end of each squadron. Every driver carried a stick with a red cotton handkerchief mounted on it as a sort of flag. Harriott leaned her arm on the gate and watched and

waited. She quivered with impatience, thinking of the red, lonely child in the plastered house behind her. But it was impossible to go on. Old Master Jupp was standing near, in his usual dignified attitude, with his accustomed long, crook-like stick. He looked even more aristocratic to-day than usual, by reason of an old brown corduroy coat which he had bought cheap from one of the keepers.

"What does it mean?" she asked impatiently. "I want to get to the post office."

He looked at her vaguely, and then he deliberately cleared his throat, delicately turning his head aside in deference to her Cockney squeamishness. He always cleared his throat before he spoke to his betters.

"Them's the Kentish sheep going back," he said, with gentle contempt for her ignorance. "They comes down in August—it's all marshy land in their part of the country, you see—and they goes back with their lambs in March. Major Saint Arthur, he always takes five thousand or more; all the gentry and farmers round take some. These ere Sussex men takes 'em as far as Shalford"—with a strong, long accent on the "ford"—"and the Kentish men meets 'em there."

They came and came. The long straight road was white and moving with them. Now and then some terrified creature would double and rush madly back. The dogs barked harshly, the drovers shouted and swore. There was a little break between one squadron and the next as a cart came by. It was for the disabled. A couple of melancholy-looking sheep who had broken down early on the journey were in it, under a stout net.

They passed at last, leaving only a cloud of choking dust behind them. Harriott rushed on. She went the road that she had gone the day before. But everything was changed. March is the most coquettish month of all twelve. It had rained heavily all night. The sky was cold and sullen. The wind came whirling savagely along the road, with its primly clipped hedges. The long stretches of ploughed land, so warmly violet yesterday, were sticky and sad — like a muddy channel shore with the tide out. Some men were stolidly hedging and ditching, laying bare the strata of stiff clay. They looked up as she passed. One touched his cap, in a half-hearted way. The others only stared.

It was cold and sad and threatening. The very hills were vague and wraith-like, as if even they retreated from such hopeless greyness.

When at last Harriott reached the post office, she sent off a telegram to Owen, employing the vague, cautious form that they had agreed on.

He came late in the afternoon. She stole out of the dimness of the Five Yew parlour to meet him. He hardly knew her. She did not look exactly ill; there was no suggestion of the "interesting invalid," but she was quite changed. She was in shadow — like the sky outside and the low-pitched room within. Some blight had fallen on her; it was lying in her dull eyes sealing her mouth. She greeted him gravely, quite sanely — making some matter-of-fact apology about the length of the journey and the treachery of the weather. Her impudent, facile tongue wagged no more — the tongue that had said so many inconsequent, foolish things was tamed, clipped primly close to commonplace.

She knelt down to the hearth and swung the kettle with a determined twist of her wrist on to the chain over the smouldering wood. "When you have been upstairs," she said, "you shall have some tea. The kettle will boil by then."

Owen was looking about him, round the room, with contempt; at her with tremendous pity. The Five Yew was hopelessly sordid, mean, and comfortless to him—he came straight from his substantial, vulgarly appointed house at Brixton, where vigilant Polly never allowed a dusty corner, a worn place in the carpet, a draught at the doors, to elude her for very long. He could not see the sentiment and simple beauty of the cottage farmhouse. It only reminded him faintly of Montgomery—the place of his birth, which he was perpetually congratulating himself on having escaped. The bowl of primroses on the table, the small, sprouting miracles in the long brown beds outside, were lost on him.

They went upstairs. Harriott, subtly influenced by her companion's mental attitude, had never been so conscious of the bareness of the Five Yew—sloping oak boards, strips of mangy felt carpet by the bedside; in the parlour, the battered hulks of a horse-hair sofa.

The child was lying in the tent bed, under the stooping dome of blue drapery. Owen looked up at these draperies curiously, with an amused contempt. He told Harriott that she need not be afraid; it was only a mild attack of measles.

Then she remembered that other child in the train.

"You must keep the room dark," he said, glancing out at the low window. The sun had broken through and was shining fiercely on it, revealing the dust and

rain splashes of a winter. The small, square bits of glass were like grey cheeks on which tears had blistered and dried. "I should light a little fire. Keep the room dark; measles always affect the eyes. A chill is the only danger; remember that. Guard against a chill. If you drive the rash in, it will be serious. Measles are simple enough to treat, with care. Warmth, dark, and nourishment—that is all."

"But a chill means death?" she asked with strange intentness, with a sudden lifting of the cloud that hung over her, with her queer eyes piercing his heavy face.

"It might—one could not be sure. With a child like that nothing is certain. It does not look any different. It has not grown."

"I don't think it has," she admitted calmly, almost flippantly. "And a chill might mean death?"

"Yes, but you will be careful. And I think it has a good constitution. Children like that often have."

"It may live to be old?"

"There is no reason why not."

"No reason why not," she repeated.

They went down into the parlour, leaving the child, who seemed to Harriott to grow more puffed and fiery every moment, alone in the bed. Owen took out his pencil and wrote two prescriptions, one for medicine and one for eye lotion.

"There is no chemist nearer than the market town," Harriott said, "and I have not any one to send."

"Tut, tut. What a place!" he tore the paper into strips. "Then I will send you the bottles by parcels post directly I return."

She was on her knees again, at the weary shrine of

the hearth. The bellows were in her coarsened hands. The vigorous "shoo, shoo" as she inflated them depressed Owen.

"The kettle won't boil," she said, holding her head a little aside, and lopping down on one hip. "I must get some spray wood. I'm very sorry to keep you waiting."

Her demure politeness and apology broke his heart. She laid the bellows on the hearth, where the bricks were a darker tone at the edge, polished by the movement of generations of feet through the long winter evenings. When she went towards the door Owen followed. She unlatched it. The barbarism of the place struck him again as he noted that lifting Norfolk latch and the semicircular slice of dirty-finger marks on the wood just beneath.

"I'll go and get you a scuttle of coal," he said, carefully pushing back his cuffs.

She laughed for the first time—it was a hollow little cackle.

"I burn wood. There is only a hundredweight of coal in the shed, enough for the bedroom fire. Get a log and some little sticks from the stack over there." She held up her hand towards the five sombre yew trees and the dwindled pile of oak.

She leaned against the lintel of the back door and watched him pull a log out and hoist it against his chest. He set it down, puffing a little by the open hearth in the parlour.

"Do you lift those things?" he asked, with one eloquent glance at her hands, fissured across the knuckles and rough as sand-paper near the wrists.

"Of course. There is no one else."

Owen went back to the stack and pulled out another, and another, and another. He carried a dozen into the house, and stood them on one end at the back of the open hearth. Then he brought an armful of spray wood, delicate and black.

"They will dry there," Harriott said gratefully, looking at the sentinel-like logs and lighting the little sticks.

Owen's hands were in his pockets and his lips were pouted out. He looked moodily at the wood across the dogs—the grey-brown length of wood three feet long or more, which she had vainly tried to blow into a blaze. It was a thick, distorted thing, forked at one end in shape like a gigantic Y.

"Did you carry *that* in?"

"Of course," she said listlessly, for the second time. "There is no one else. The kettle is singing now."

She made his tea, bringing out a head of bread and a dab of butter on cracked plates. They did not talk much—except of measles. On common interests, on old Brixton days, on the special tragedy of her life, they did not touch. She was unusually silent, more silent than she had ever been in her life. Owen was afraid to ask her how long this was to last—this death in life. It was killing her. But he dared not remonstrate. She had changed entirely—gone out of his ken. She seemed conscious of nothing but the child. She took no interest in outside things. He said once, with his irresponsible paternal complacency, that Polly had weaned the twins, that the stronger one could run a little, holding on to chairs; but she did not seem to hear. She merely existed in a sad maternal ecstasy. Here she was, bricked and plastered in at the end of the cat-

tle-track, beyond the rough, brown fields, putting herself as a buffer between her child and the world. Owen's eyes were dog-like in their pleading whenever they met the strange, frozen glance of hers, but he said nothing.

When he left she walked with him down the path to the gate; a black cloud, with the sun lurid behind it, hung like a blot above her bare head.

"There will be a storm before long," she said, putting out her hand. Owen took it. The contact was unpleasant: it was like touching a grater to touch those torn, harrowed fingers of hers.

"Be sure you keep it warm," he reiterated finally in his heavy professional manner. "I should give a warm drink, that will help to bring the rash out. On no account drive the rash in."

When he was out of sight she turned to the house, went upstairs, nailed an old green skirt up at the window to keep out the sun, and made a fire. She hesitated before she put a match to it, resting her coal-smutted hands on the front of her thighs, and brooding over something. But at last she decided. When the fire began to crackle joyously she administered the hot drink and piled more blankets on the bed.

The room grew suffocating to healthy lungs. There was the unmistakable faint, unpleasant odour peculiar to the complaint.

The child was lying in a half-stupid state and did not want her. She crept away and ran into the garden; her virile, fresh-air instinct was very strong. The sun was out again. So long as the sun kept out it felt like summer. But it was a treacherous day. Although a lark went up singing and lost itself in the blue of the sky,

the clouds hung sullen over the hills. Those hills that she half loved, half dreaded, were purple; they grew every moment more distinct; they seemed to be drawing in, as if to cover the house in the hollow, and those tragic two in it. Perhaps they scented what was coming; knew that the drama of the Wickens was soon to be played out; here, in this rough country, amidst the poor pasture lands and low-growing woods of the weald; here, where generations before it had begun.

Harriott went over to the run. The bird and her chicks were scratching in the heap of powdery wood ash. It was feeding-time. The mother, all the fever of her broodiness over, had sleek plumage again and stalked about proud and calm. Twelve little balls of yellow fluff! Harriott stood and watched them, letting the strong wind, and savage, fitful sun purge her of that room upstairs. She noticed for the first time that one of the chicks had been hatched malformed. It hopped painfully on one leg, dragging the other uselessly behind it. It was perpetually getting in the way of the eleven other active things; the mother trod on it more than once.

Why should this be? What had it done? There could be no possibility of pre-natal sin in the gold and silver of an egg.

She thought of the other — her own — tossing and muttering, half blind, in the room upstairs. Then she studied the big black hen curiously. *She* was not possessed by any tenderness for a thing so useless as the lame chick. Once she pecked it savagely, and put back her head and gave a long, weird, sinister "caw," — very unlike her liquid cluckings to the sound ones of her

brood. The wretched thing was perpetually trodden on and pecked at by them all. It could not cleanse itself in the sweet grey ash, it could do nothing but get in the way. It was an alien, an irritant, a thing not to be understood, not to be borne with. It got in the mother's way again, her splay foot pressed it flat, and it squeaked out piteously.

The protest enraged her ; she dived her head down, dug her pointed red beak deep, and tore out its entrails. Then she clucked savagely, and the rest of the brood swarmed round. They scratched and fought and struggled. In a very little while there was little to hint at this bird drama but a bare handful of muddy fluff, trampled out of all shape, and a pair of small legs and claws stuck out helplessly.

Harriott stood staring, in her stupid, dazed way, at the little mangled, mutilated sacrifice. Her eyes were like pale flames in her ashen face.

The same thought came back—the thought that had come when Owen had said that a chill might mean death ; the thought that had come again as she knelt by the unlighted bedroom fire, with the greasy, striped match-box in her hand. She had dismissed it as malignant ; she seemed to see now that it was heaven-sent. She stared and stared at that heap of trampled fluff.

She went into the shed, and fetched the bag of wheat for the mother, and the smaller bag of finer grain for the chicks. She scattered the grains mechanically, looking at the mother-bird with horrible fascination all the time. Was *she* wiser than a woman ?

Over the hedge, through the black yews, carried by the cutting, whistling wind—the almost human wind

that had pursued her in the winter — she seemed to hear again the hissing whisper in the railway carriage : —

“ It ’ud be a mercy if God A’mighty was to see fit to take a poor, afflicted thing like that to Hissself.”

Why, if He lacked mercy, lacked light to see, should she ?

Couldn’t she make this supremest sacrifice of mother-love ?

It came as an inspiration, a solution.

The long years ! Spring after the deadness of winter, summer, autumn ! The sun and shadow of the seasons — year after year. To think of it — a woman ! Young, middle-aged, old ! Always an insensate, helpless animal. Always in torpor, broken now and then by an agony which nothing could touch. A woman ! Shut off from everything that was sweet and natural and womanly. Surely her love, which had done so much, could do this — if God would not.

She went back — the thought singing in her frenzied head. She had the calm face of a fanatic, a madwoman. She looked like those women who have marched to the stake for a dogma. She wasn’t conscious either of crime or blasphemy. That hen had solved the puzzle of her life. Things were absurdly simple.

It was getting dusk. She went into the house, which was already dark, lighted a candle, went upstairs and flung herself on her knees by the bed, crying pitifully.

Only a mild attack of measles ! Other mothers would think little of that — it was one of the variations of maternity. But with her it emphasised. She saw beyond the spring at last. The future unrolled itself — flat, inevitable, pitiless.

She stayed on her knees for hours, one of her wild, wordless prayers gushing up from her heart. The child tossed and mumbled; the wind screamed; now and then there was an impatient splutter of rain against the glass. The storm had come.

She got up at last, every glint of intelligence gone out of her eyes: her face the colour of the clay on the track outside.

She stooped over the bed and almost kissed the child. Then she drew back. What was the good of unnerving oneself? Hadn't a woman the courage, the superb callousness of a bird?

With a steady hand, one by one, she peeled the blankets from the bed. Once her hand touched the burning flesh, which had become the colour of a clear, flameless coke fire. One by one! She left at last only the tumbled sheet—the coarse cotton sheet which had been so painfully mended by fingers that she had never known. Then staggering across the room she dashed back the casement, never waiting to hook it, rattling the crazy frame in her haste, as if she feared to give herself time to breathe. She gave a wild final look around the mean room, averting her eyes from that blue-domed bed. Yes. Wind and rain would do the rest. Nature would help to wipe out her own blunder.

She went down to the black hearth in the parlour. She rolled her head in a shawl to keep out sound of the storm,—to keep out all sound. She set her elbows grimly on the table, pressed her palms against her muffled ears, patted out a ragged novelette on the cloth, and plunged into the world of dukes. She read the story through and through, never taking in the full

sense of a single sentence ; turning from beginning to end and back again, whipping over the leaves with fingers that grew more numb and stiff as the room grew colder, as the night wore away, as the storm raged itself to death.

* * * * *

On the third day the child died. She sat by the bed through all those days of waiting, the little prayer-book that Dandie had bought for her held open in her hands. Now and again she dropped the book to her knee, and took to intent study of the pieces in the patchwork quilt. It was old, dimmed and beautified by sun and water — full of colour, a rustic mosaic. Sometimes she read aloud from the book ; monotonously, with a watery smile about her uncertain mouth.

The days wore away. They were bright days ! March days, with jolly, blustering wind careering round the house, with the birds singing unceasingly. Each morning a missel thrush queried and commented as it perched on the great pear tree in the orchard, each dusk a robin on the barn across the way threw off a sad song.

On the third morning she looked from her window early and saw from it signs of the young, strong, working world that was still throbbing on the other side of the cattle-track. She saw a timber-cart, full of pink, barked logs sway heavily down the grassy lane leading to Barly Bridge. She was struck, comforted even, at such a time, by its picturesque form. She saw children with baskets going to the copse for daffodils.

On the third afternoon about five her child died.

“ So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal — ”

There was a rustle in the bed. She looked in — at the poor body which was so white. The child gasped. She dropped the book and stood up. The child looked at her — the first intelligent look. The look froze her. There seemed reproach in it — or was it gratitude?

She had been trying to fine all that was material out of her. But it was her child, her flesh, and it was dying. She dragged it out from under that blue roof of chintz, and held it fiercely, and let it die with its head in the hollow of her neck, with her lips taking its last breath. The sacrifice was complete.

She went downstairs and made methodical preparation. When the water was hot, she took it up to the room in a jug, laid the child on her knee and washed it. She dabbed at it very carefully with a soft towel. Her touch was pathetic in its callousness, her face was flooded with a weak, foolish look of triumph. Her lips were dry. She had cried herself out, prayed herself out instinctively to a vague God. She felt nothing.

It had been a baby — always a baby. She had never left off those first delicious baby things, which she had gathered together three — four — years ago, with such strange, half-developed emotions. She pulled to her the basket — full of white garments, powder, safety-pins — a little brush, with a mother-of-pearl back.

She dressed it in a long robe; the armholes were quite big enough still — at four years! The long sweep of daintily tucked cambric and embroidery shrouded the limbs.

It was a costly robe; she remembered buying it in Bond Street during those careless days of hansoms — and being thrilled a little with incipient maternity as she

fingered its daintiness. A very costly robe! But nothing was too costly with which to enter Freedom!

It had been a baby. She reached out mechanically for the bottle when she had tied the strings of the robe — just as she always reached out on other evenings. A smell of curdled milk, a black, big teat, beat the absolute truth in on her. She gave an awful sob, caught the stiff, doll-like body to her neck, and rocked it madly through the long night.

When the birds under the eaves began to twitter at dawn she put her treasure on the bed and crept away into the next room. There was a four-post bed there, without hangings, without linen, but she could huddle into the blankets. She was calm again. The bare posts seemed to interest her. They spired up to the low ceiling.

"As if they wanted to get to heaven," she said dreamily, taking off her clothes.

Before she blew the candle out she said her prayers. It was a nightly habit — a mere jargon. It dated back to her feverish worship of the crucifix. She said the prayers in a low, gabbling chant — putting in no codicil for forgiveness.

CHAPTER XIX

THE child died on the day of the Culture Class : it was not intentional effrontery. Miss St. Arthur was the high priestess of culture in that corner of Sussex. She was self-elected, but none dreamed of disputing her right to the position. She was the greatest social power in the neighbourhood ; it would have been very bad taste to pit oneself against Miss St. Arthur, and quite useless. The major was so rich. Unkind people — bitter-tongued, feeble souls, who had been denied the privilege of culture — said that he was only a militia officer, and had made his money in soap — but that is by the way. All right-minded folk scrambled genteelly for election to the class ; membership carried so many privileges. It gave you the *entrée* to the Hall ; it might actually mean going with the Hall party to the annual hunt ball. So every one, even the Vicaress, soaked herself in culture. The members addled their poor heads with Browning, took Carlyle's grim pleasantries in a perfectly serious spirit, and talked a bewildering jargon of mysticism and political economy. The rule of the class was that Miss St. Arthur selected the particular form of reading, chose the books, but did not supply them, and cross-examined and enlightened the members on obscure points at the fortnightly meetings — to the tune of overdrawn tea and a five-shilling cake.

The Hall, as the driver had told Harriott, had been

overhauled and made fit for a gentleman's residence. It palpitated with the unceasing energy of a rich man, anxious to improve his property and his position in the county. There were always new roads being made, new farming machinery coming down from London, new outbuildings being put up — smart, spick-and-span buildings that stared the sober old ones out of all countenance. Lying along the stately Hall, all mutilations and excrescences, were lines of hard, gleaming green-houses. The major had a weakness for glass.

A couple of hundred years — in feeling — lay between the Hall, with its sweeping drive, velvet lawns, plate-glass windows, and glossy shrubberies, and the outside pastoral life, which changed little as the generations died down and sprang afresh. There were centuries of difference — in feeling, again — between morbid heart-racked Harriott, alone and distraught in the antiquated Five Yew, and these calm, walled-in country ladies, sipping mild draughts of culture as they sat in the long drawing-room of the Hall. There were ladies of all ages and of the same type. There were young ladies — straight-backed, small-brained girls — who rode bicycles and followed the hounds. There were matrons. There were elderly spinsters — of limited, certain income and unquestionable family connections. But they were all alike: all had healthy complexions, and the heavy, bull-dog sort of jaw which distinguishes your obtuse, thoroughly complacent Englishwoman.

The French windows at the south end afforded a view of intensely green grass, brushed clear of every leaf, shorn close and patched with beds of white and purple crocuses. There was a grand piano in the room

and a stack of greenhouse plants, in the foreground of which was a wax-like lily. In the recess was an oak chest, with the arms of the Wickens carved on it.

Tea came in; the books were put away, and the party prepared for that half-hour's gossip on local affairs which more than paid for the drudgery of culture. They talked of some tableaux which were in prospect at the Village Hall, of the last stag hunt, of the people who had taken the big new house on Barly Bridge Road, of new babies who had been born, of old folk who had shuffled off, of servants, of greenhouses, home-made preserves — and Harriott.

"A man went to the Five Yew on Tuesday," one lady said significantly. "Old Mrs. Povey told me — I went round with the Parish Magazine yesterday — you know she notices everything. She was on her way back from Leverence, where her married daughter lives — Mick Gatley's wife, you know — and it is twins again."

"That woman's incorrigible," said the Vicaress, sharply, lowering her voice and looking cautiously at the little cluster of unmarried girls at the window, who talked languidly of bicycles. "I suppose she'll be wanting things out of the maternity-bag again."

"Mrs. Povey saw him go into the Five Yew," the other lady went on.

"Was he a gentleman?"

"You can't take old Mrs. Povey's word for that. She thinks he was, because he wore a tall hat. I say that is against him. No gentleman wears a tall hat in the country."

"I wonder *who* and *what* she is?" came in a little chorus.

"She is a tenant of ours," Miss St. Arthur said, with a little amused, condescending laugh. "We generally like to know something of our people. But she isn't quite the sort of person that you could take tea or a milk-pudding to, and of course anything else is quite out of the question."

"Of course. Did you ever see such a little object as that child?"

"I certainly think some one ought to call on the poor woman," said an easy-looking matron — the doggedness of whose lower jaw was softened by rolls of flesh.

"One can't do it, mamma," her daughter called out sharply from the window. "Don't you remember the artist person who took Ivy Cottage last summer? You *would* call there, and they were most vulgar. Always poking fun at everybody; it was such bad taste — you never felt sure that you were not being laughed at. This person is sure to be the same — only worse."

"She hasn't been to church," the Vicaress said, with something of relief, "so my going is out of the question. Really the parish grows so large that we need a curate — but then the living is so small."

"The parish *does* grow," said the doctor's wife, with a comfortable air of reflection. "They are putting up new cottages in Gig's Lane. Such nice cottages — four rooms and a strip of garden for half a crown a week. Cottages always mean a lot of children."

Her manner was very different from the manner of the Vicaress.

"No lady," broke in one of the girls at the window, with the sweeping severity of youth, "would go through the winter in thin-soled shoes with French heels."

"She is a dreadful person," added another. "We were riding along the Ash Hollow road one afternoon — the day the fox doubled back to Pidgwick. We couldn't open the gate. She was passing, and although Charlie shouted out, she took not the least notice: he had to dismount and throw it into the hedge himself. Those heave-gates are an awful nuisance, and the farmers actually expect you to put them back."

"Well, I'm glad she hasn't been to church," the Vicar said. "I really haven't room for any more parish visits on my list."

She rose and shook hands all round, with a delightful air of urbanity. She was the Vicar's wife, and never allowed any of them — not even Miss St. Arthur — to forget it.

When she was gone there was a moment's silence; it was the rule to discuss a member mildly directly her back was turned, but each lady had a delicate objection to starting. Miss St. Arthur said at last conclusively, —

"If the Vicar hasn't called, we mustn't."

There was a woman in a corner by the fire, who had sat silent and watchful while the others dissected Harriott. She passed her cup for a second cup of tea, and said curtly, —

"I don't see that at all."

They all stared at her in a cold, wooden fashion. The neighbourhood didn't exactly approve of Mrs. Jade. There was nothing actively against her; but it wasn't well bred to think for oneself, and she was always doing it.

"We must be guided by our Vicar, of course," Miss

St. Arthur said frigidly. "I couldn't dream of calling on a person that the Vicar had not taken up."

Her tone was more conclusive than before. She implied broadly that what *she* could not do was clearly impossible to Mrs. Jade.

"I don't see that at all," repeated the other; "in fact, though one wouldn't say it before his wife, the Vicar is superfluous, except on Sundays. One might shut him up in a bandbox, to compose sermons, during the other six days."

"Oh, Mrs. Jade!"

The brocade of Miss St. Arthur's tea-gown seemed to visibly stiffen; the other ladies fell away from that corner by the fire where the rebellious woman sat.

"Pooh!" she said composedly; "the parson was the policeman of the Middle Ages: he isn't wanted now. You must all know that—we've been reading up history."

Miss St. Arthur felt for the first time that perhaps the Culture Class was a mistake: it was too strong for excitable heads. It was actually unsettling to one's views—it had an intangible tendency towards Roman Catholicism, democracy, sympathy with poachers, and tampering with the Land Laws.

She thought a moment, and then said triumphantly, with her most ponderous, high-priestess air:—

"We have certainly been reading history, and we have seen the clergy go through unsatisfactory stages. For instance, in the last century, at the beginning of this even, they used to hunt, but the fox-hunting vicar fortunately belong to the past."

"I'd rather have a fox-hunting parson than a tennis-

playing curate!" the other cried valiantly. "It's more manly."

She drank her tea to the dregs, pulled on her strong gloves, and rose.

"I must get back to baby," she said, glancing at the clock. "I suppose I shall see most of you again at the penny-reading on Monday. Good-by. To-morrow I am going to the Five Yew. It mayn't be clerical etiquette, but it's Christian— That poor woman, she's quite young—no older than half of you girls—looks desperate. I've passed her in the governess-car a dozen times; once I nearly stopped. We get rather fossilised, you know; we are too secure and comfortable; we stick our noses in culture and blanket clubs and parish magazines, and let the world outside break its heart. It may do for the Vicar, but it won't do for me. Good-by."

They watched her walk her bicycle down the serpentine yellow drive, mount, and bowl off.

"Mrs. Jade is vulgar," said somebody, presently.

"I did hear that her father was in trade."

"Well, we shall see her at the penny-reading, and hear how she gets on."

At about the same hour Owen went to Gammeridge Gardens and called on Mrs. Megson. She kept him waiting in the drawing-room, as she had kept him waiting so many times; he heard the heavy thump of her feet overhead, from the wardrobe to the duchesse looking-glass. The room had not changed. It seemed odd and heartless of it to stand still while Harriott had gone through such a wild torrent of struggle and despair.

Mrs. Megson bustled in at last; there was a pale blue bow at the lower junction of her fat neck to-day, and

the afternoon dusting of violet powder clung to the roughened skin of her nose.

"Ah! how do you do, Dr. Owens?" she said. "Did you get my note? I wanted you to have a look at Jane. She's got a bad influenza cold—it's very awkward, for we have an entertainment on Monday. These country servants are so dreadfully unhealthy. I believe their blood is made of water."

"I have had no note from you," he said, "and I will see Jane later on. At present I want to talk to you about your niece."

Mrs. Megson threw out her doughy hands deprecatingly, as if to stop him.

"It is not of the slightest use," she said positively. "I know exactly what you are going to tell me. She has separated from Daniel—no one can stand her peculiar temper. I was certain that there was something wrong when she brought that child here. It isn't the least good to speak to *me*. Mr. Megson won't have her inside his doors."

"She doesn't want to come here," he returned bluntly. "But some one ought to look after her. She is alone and in trouble."

"So she *has* fallen out with Daniel?"

"It is a very painful story—a long story. She will tell you everything fully when you see her. He turned her off because of the child. It is an idiot, and he was angry."

Mrs. Megson began to work her eyebrows, to mouth and to mumble, without actually articulating a word. She wore an expression which she had picked up from her husband—a sort of outraged Britisher expression.

Mr. Megson wore it when the gas bill was too high, when local politics went wrong, when neighbours became a nuisance by keeping too many fowls or children.

"But he must keep her," she cried out shrilly at last. "If he won't live with her he must make some provision. It is his child, isn't it? What are the husbands and wives coming to?"

"It is a long story," Owen repeated — he did not want to tell his share in it. "Darnell is healthy enough, but I spoke to you as plainly as I could about Harriott. She ought not to have married."

"Fiddle-dee-dee!" called out Mrs. Megson, tossing her head. "When I was young people never thought of such things — it isn't decent. Daniel must be brought to his senses; Mr. Megson shall go and see him. Where is Harriott?"

Owen stuck out his lips and scowled. He was sitting forward on the chair and twirling his sleek hat in his big hands. When Mrs. Megson put her brisk query he started. The whole scheme and colour of that isolated Five Yew came back to him with sick vividness. He had to stare hard at the art pots and enamelled milking-stools to assure himself that he was away from it — that he had returned to the everyday soothing comfort of Brixton.

"She has taken a tumble-down old house in Sussex, — a terrible place," he said. "She is living with the child on her thirty-five pounds a year. It is murder to leave her there alone. You must go. I will look up the trains —" he fished his time-table out of his breast-pocket and ran his finger down a page, softly murmuring stations to himself as he read.

"You get out at Pidgwick," he said aloud at last; "and then a fly will take you to the Five Yew. The man's fare is four-and-six—he'll charge you five shillings unless you bargain."

Mrs. Megson never heard the last thrifty sentence. She set her fat hands on her knees and curved her fingers convulsively. The afternoon milkman came with his unearthly "yowl" down the Gardens: the clinking of jugs as the maid took them from the dresser-hooks in the kitchen was distinct.

"The Five Yew," Mrs. Megson said at last, speaking in a hushed, scared whisper, and looking with a kind of fixed horror at the floor, as if a corpse stretched along the gay carpet—"the Five Yew! Oh, you must have made some mistake."

"I assure you there is no mistake. It is a tumble-down, whitey-yellow sort of place, with yew trees at the side, a grey paling round the garden, and a rough road sloping to a pond. There is a barn across the way—a ramshackle old shed with a stone roof."

"Yes, yes. And she is there?"

"She is there. What of it?"

Mrs. Megson looked round helplessly, instinctively, for the album. It was not on the accustomed table. She remembered that she had put it away at the last spring clean; she had noticed that in "better houses" they no longer had a family album in the drawing-room. She had a feeling that if she could open that album and show him Rosalie for the second time it might help her to tell the rest of the story. She sat for a moment, palpitating and staring, her fingers curved round her trembling knees. Then she broke out.

"The Five Yew! It is the house where she was born; the house where her poor mother died, where her father killed himself. Is the great open hearth there still? Mrs. Gatley called it a down hearth. I saw Heber Wicken lying in front of it with his throat cut. Harriott at the Five Yew! What in heaven's name sent the poor girl there?"

A little shudder crept over Owen, shook his big, comfortable body in the professional frock-coat. The coincidence appealed to his Welsh sense of the mystic. There was something in it beyond mere coincidence. He felt more hopeless, more heavy-hearted, about Harriott than ever. It was impossible that she should come out whole from such a house. The thing had been arranged for her. We are wrapped round by a dim veil — we know nothing.

Mrs. Megson was crying. Her face twitched comically, her bilious skin turned all the colours of the rainbow. She mopped and dabbed at her fiery eyes with the usual aggressively scented handkerchief.

"When will you start?"

Owen's strained words were like the first heavy drops of a storm.

"I can't go to-day. I must wait and see Mr. Megson. To-morrow. Will that do?"

"To-morrow? There is a train reaching Pidgwick at 3.25. Can you catch that?"

"I think so. Let me see!" She finally flicked at her eyes, and returned to the world. "To-morrow is a busy day, the man is coming to take up this carpet and polish the floor. The trams run from the corner of the Gardens every ten minutes — yes, I will go."

"I think you will be glad that you went," he said gratefully. "She has changed very much, and she is in particular trouble just now. The child has measles."

"Measles! Then it is to be hoped it will die," Mrs. Megson cried fervently. "I shall go. It is my duty to go. But Daniel must be made to do his duty too. If the child dies it will be plain sailing. They will come together again. But I should like to give Daniel a piece of my mind."

"She will explain everything," Owen said. "And now about Jane."

CHAPTER XX

HARRIOTT slept soundly. She awoke late, with a smooth, fresh feeling, and stretched her limbs luxuriously and drew the warm blankets round her ears and stared up at the spiring four posts of the bedstead and at the strange room — hardly remembering.

There was a soft, perpetual hum outside ; an occasional clear “drip, drip.” She got out of bed, drew the curtain, and saw that it was raining — a fine, resolute rain, coming straight from a gloomy sky. It was a penetrating rain, too ; damp stained the wall near the window.

A sternly grey March day ! She crept back into the blanketed bed again — a little dazed still, but beginning to be vaguely afraid of herself and the house, and the one room through the wall.

The rain kept on and lulled her. She shut her eyes and tried to sleep — beginning to realise stupidly that perhaps it would be better to go to sleep and never wake any more. She had almost lost consciousness, things were beginning to jumble in her whirring head, when she was startled by a violent knocking at the front door. She sprang up, sitting wild eyed, straight in the bed ; her heart beat in great, striding, choking beats. She wondered ; she dreaded.

’Meliar Wade always came to the back ; no one else ever came. Letters and food she carried from Ash Hollow.

Who could it be? Had Owen returned? There were only two people in the world, 'Meliar Wade and Owen. She took her watch from under the pillow. It was nearly three o'clock. The knocking kept on. She slipped out of bed and began to dress. Her hands trembled; she drew the strings of her petticoats into knots instead of bows. She walked sideways, looking furtively behind her. She could hardly keep steady enough to smooth her mat of tangled pale hair and dash cold water into her drowsy eyes. The knocking unnerved her. It kept on, it grew louder; there seemed a sinister pertinacity about it.

She slipped on her gown—the shabby blue serge in which she did the house-work. There was a great patch of grease on the front of the skirt; collar and cuffs were black and shining, hooks were missing on the bodice.

Then she hurried down the crazy oak stairs. Through the glass panels of the door she saw the figure of a man in a mackintosh; he had an umbrella held well down against the wet. Something in the outlines of him, in the pose of the head, made her put out her hand to the wall.

She opened the door. *The man was Dandie.* She held on to the door, clinging weakly to the stout jamb, as he stood on the streaming brick path, the wicket-gate left open behind him, the sodden flower-borders hemming him in, the barn with its crazy timber and stout stone roof putting itself between him and the hills.

He stepped in as a matter of course, taking her astonishment as a matter of course, too. He set his umbrella outside, saying with a sort of scornful cheeri-

ness that he supposed it would be safe enough. She led the way mechanically into the low-ceiled, brooding parlour, with the dead hearth, the shabby sofa, and the cheap ornaments.

Dandie looked about him disdainfully. Then he looked at his wife and seemed shocked and startled. But he was not embarrassed at all.

"Poor old Rio," he murmured in the familiar tone of languid, patronising tenderness. "And you were so fond of pretty things!"

He felled her with the tender, rarely used pet name. She gripped her hand round a chair, but her face was flinty.

He smiled. Under the trim yellow mustache she saw his even teeth. That fierce parting scene in Kensington crumbled. Her heart went out to him. She was impressed, as she had always been, with his external refinements; he looked luxurious even in a mackintosh. He represented money, good nature, natural emotions, health of body and mind—everything antagonistic to her life at the Five Yew. He was so stupid and shallow. What a heritage! Stupidity, shallowness. How much agony slipped by him! She had been so racked; she wanted rest. If only she had been spared maternity. She could feel all this and notice that he had a new scarf-pin and a particularly dainty tie before she stammered, —

"Why have you come?"

"To make it up," Dandie said simply, showing those foolish, flashing teeth again. "I want to pull things together. I've had time to think it all over. I feel sure I was wrong. I feel sure of you. I wronged you —

you were never that sort of girl. It was a mistake. You can explain it. Why didn't you explain it at the start? Spirit, I suppose; perhaps it served me right. I've turned things over in my mind night after night — lying alone. I don't sleep so well as I did. If you'll give me your word about Mitcham —"

He seemed on the brink of adding an endearment; once she thought with a surging delight and horror that he was going to step forward and kiss her. But he held back until he was quite sure.

"About Mitcham?"

They had seated themselves—a rush-seated chair apiece—on different sides of the table.

"We want you—I and the child," he continued tenderly.

He had come to the house feeling quite sure of her, reproaching himself, in the moderate way of a small-minded man; come in a mood that was half gay—rather anticipating the reconciliation as a revival of tenderness; but now he seemed to be growing remorseful. He kept his eyes on her with queer persistence. She had not been near the glass for days; had she seen her own face it would have startled her.

She threw herself back in the chair with a jerk.

"You and the child?" she said slowly.

The gurgling rain outside seemed to take up the query and carry it over the far-reaching pasture lands.

"Yes, of course," he returned rather impatiently. "Why not? Isn't it natural that we three should be together? She is such a jolly little thing. She wouldn't bother you now; sleeps like a top until nearly eight in the morning; spells out of story books and asks ques-

tions that stagger a fellow. I take the world and all that's in it for granted—it's easier; but she wants to get at the bottom of everything. We went into the country last autumn—after—you remember. What do you think she calls a wheelbarrow? 'A wheel with two strokes to go it along.' What do you think of that?"

He laughed. Harriott started; it was odd to hear laughter in the Five Yew. His face glowed with pride and love. He went on, with wistful apology, in view of her stony face.

"She isn't a bit of a bore; any mother might be proud of her. Such a high-bred-looking little thing—that is your Wicken strain. People pass remarks about her in the Gardens; sometimes I take her as far as the Albert Memorial myself. She is more like me than ever; you would see the likeness at once."

"I should see the likeness?"

A second laugh ran round the Five Yew parlour—a weak, mad laugh.

"Yes." He seemed perplexed and chilled—by her queer merriment, by her parrot-like voice.

"And she is sharp, too, thank God," he continued with an effort at ease.

Harriott threw her body forward, with her breast against the edge of the table, her chin peaked out, and her hands spread on the cloth.

"Why do you say 'thank God'?" she asked quickly.

"Because—because of something your Aunt Megson let drop once," he returned with some embarrassment. "And that fellow Owens, he hinted at it too. They insinuated—I mean that I gathered—don't look

at me so fiercely, Harriott dear—I gathered—some families are not quite so healthy as they might be. I was afraid that you had a bad bill of health from your parents—that your children might suffer. But Linnie is straight and sweet and sturdy; sharp as a needle, too, bless her.”

“My children suffer?” She laughed again.

“Yes, that would be natural.” He laughed, too, in a forced, uneasy way—she seemed hardly sane. “But she has never had a day’s illness.”

“Never had the measles?”

“Never. Will it take you long to get ready? I won’t leave you in this hole another hour. I trust you. We will talk things over in the fly; I’ve got it waiting at the end of the lane. Just say you forgive me. If I had known you were so seedy I would have come before. I got your letter to the lawyer. I didn’t want you to be hard up, even—even if it were true. I told Ann you could explain. She has been very good, but one woman is always down on another woman, and she wanted me to go for a divorce. I told her you would explain.”

“Explain what?” she asked crisply.

He flushed and seemed annoyed. He thought she was coarse, and showed a great lack of tact.

“About Dr. Owens, of course,” he said bluntly, “and the house at Mitcham. Did you spend all night there with him? That child who was hidden away of course you can explain?”

His tone, his words, were unmistakable. The truth flashed on her: they had been playing at cross purposes that day in Kensington. He had been on the

wrong scent all the time. He had not found her out yet. He did not know. He believed her guilty of adultery. He believed that the child was basely born. He saddled her child — theirs — with Linnie's misfortune.

He was staring hard at her haggard face. She looked an old, worn woman. She was stamped indelibly with something terrible. He looked at her untidy gown, trimmed here and there with crimson silk that had gone dull and greasy. He looked at her rough hands and careless hair, at her foot, which was thrust into a dreadful old shoe with a broken lace and a bulge at the side. It was a pity that she had let herself go to pieces in that way. But what could one expect of any woman? He looked through the windows at the heavy fields and at the straight sheet of rain. He looked at the walls, with the sickly, despairing art paper, and the chromos in gilt frames. He looked at the gaping hearth. The wind came down the wide chimney and gently flipped the cotton wood-smoked frill. What a place! A man would have cut his throat. A woman simply didn't do her hair.

He had been waiting a long time for his answer. She put those grubby, cut hands with the flattened nails before her eyes. It seemed eternity to Dandie before she put them down and gave a long, deep breath. It was nearly a groan. Little flecks of emotion played on her face. She seemed to be emerging from some sort of mental blurr, coming out of a terrible dream into a far more terrible reality. She said at last with great deliberation: —

“You — you know. There could only be one reason for a woman doing a thing like that. We were together

in that house all night. We had been there together before. As for the child—that does not matter, does it?”

She stopped, her worn hands clasped, her untidy head hanging, and her cheeks an agonised red. The speech had been torture to her. Those self-incriminating words had seared her tongue. But he did not know. He must not know. He still believed that Linnie—child of the Clapham servant-girl and a man unknown—was their own—his and hers.

He thought that it—lying in the long robe, that marvel of patient needlework—was Owen's. In the room upstairs! Lying just over their head! Their child. The child that she had adored, had loved well enough to murder. She had burdened her soul with a supreme sin for pure worship and pity of that child. Should she take him upstairs?

Yes, she had murdered it. Life was empty now. She had not remembered very clearly; she had been so sleepy, so worn out until now. It was lying upstairs, very cold, quite still. It wouldn't make that maddening, feeble whine any more. It wouldn't have another terrible, mysterious attack of pain. She had loved it so supremely. Dandie saw her throw up her head abruptly and fix her odd, widely opened eyes on the ceiling—which was yellowed with wood-smoke like everything else in the room. Then she stared down at the floor.

There was something under the table. It glittered. It was on the hemp carpet, near Dandie's foot. She bobbed suddenly and picked it up. She put it on the table. There was an expression of tired challenge in

her eyes. She gave the thing a little flick with her finger, and it rolled to Dandie's hand.

There was salvation in it; a way of getting rid of him — for ever and for ever and for ever.

They must not even touch each other again. She had killed his child. And he was so shallow; he wouldn't see it in the right light. How handsome he was; how clean; how calm! His features cut so clearly; elegance in every little movement. He was so impassively well bred that he reminded her of the dukes in the novel-ettes, except that he was not quite so tall. The resemblance so tickled her that she almost laughed.

He must be sent away; he must go back to Linnie — to the child he loved and believed in. And she! well, she must stay.

He picked the gold thing up. She was watching for the change in him; she thought he would remember. Yes, he did. Of course he would. One could not mis-read the meaning of that sudden, cold, pitiless flash in his eyes.

It was Owen's pencil-case, and a rather singular one. His monogram was on a seal at the end. He had used it many and many an evening in Gammeridge Gardens years ago — when Dandie came courting, and they had all played cards — the Megsons loved cards. Owen had always kept the score — of old-fashioned games like "all fours." Dandie, scowling down at the shining thing in his hand, seemed to see him using it again — his lips stuck out, and his finger-nails long and rather dirty.

It was Owen's pencil. This was another service he had rendered her. One of many — a quite unconscious

One this time, and the last of any sort that she would ever need. He must have dropped it when he blundered up to help her with the logs.

Dandie's white fingers grew limp, and the pencil dropped to the table. He looked up. Harriott thought at first that he was going to strike her, as he had done that day in Kensington. His mouth was stern; he kept moistening his lips with his tongue as he had done on that other day. Perhaps he was going to swear; she could bear the blow better. He seemed to have a difficulty in swallowing. Then she feared that he was going to cry, his eyes grew pink and uncertain; there was always something so grimly comic in a man's tears.

He did not strike, nor swear, nor sob. He got up without a word and looked at her. She met the glance unflinchingly with one from her strained, tragic eyes. If he had been more imaginative, a shade less stupid, he would have seen that there was something gravely wrong with her. He would have seen that she was acting; there was staginess about her very attitude. She did not look a guilty woman; merely a maddened, half-stunned one. Her eyes were gloomy, but her lips parted into a silly smile, showing her crooked teeth and the prominent gums that had always been against her. She looked plain, she looked foolish; nothing more — to him.

"Then it is true? Ann was right?"

"Of course," she cried, with hideous flippancy. "Why, he was here only yesterday. I suppose the pencil dropped out of his pocket. Why — when — when you knocked, I ran down anyhow — because I thought — it doesn't matter, you see, with *him*!"

"Stop!" He took a stride towards her with his

doubled hand out. She did not flinch. The hand dropped. She had never loved him so much. She very nearly threw herself on his breast and sobbed out,—

“It is a lie!”

But she thought of the room above; and thought of her supreme maternal sacrifice; and thought of Linnie, the basely born child that she hated. But he! He loved her so dearly that he had grown to imagine a likeness. He was so tender to children. He would have loved the other as well, perhaps better. She had schemed and suffered in vain. She had bungled. The knowledge that she had bungled—that all her plots had been superfluous—was turning her poor brain. It had been superfluous. But it was no use to think of that now. Let him go: let him be happy. Let him and Linnie and Ann be happy together. Let the child be happy—the child that she had freed. As for her!—

Dandie wheeled round to the door. Before he passed through, she said:—

“Take Ann’s advice and get a divorce. It will be better.”

He did not answer. He went out of the house without another word or look, shutting the door with his well-bred air of gentleness behind him. She heard him stop to pick up his umbrella, and then, through the window, she watched him go down the path and through the gate, which he closed carefully.

She stole out and watched him plough across the cattle-track. He went slowly. He never gave one look back. She watched him. He kept control enough to

pick his way through the clay into which his elegant town-shoes stuck now and then; he even stopped to turn his trousers up a little higher. She watched him until the swelling brown uplands hid him—covered him away for ever.

She stood alone at the gate with the rain falling on her matted hair. It leaked in through her burst shoe, and sent a chill right through her. She was feeling very strange and weak.

It was a sad, steady rain—a persistent rain. The sky was like a veil—no shades, no break, no cloud. A veil of whitey-grey, with a wide, regular mesh through which fine water sprayed. There was no sound but rain, rain—rain in a subdued, melancholy rush, made more positive here and there by a “glug, glug” in the ditch, or by smacking drops from the water-pipes to the bricks.

There was no sign of lifting. But in the long, brown borders that she had so loved and watched there were primroses—yellow and wine coloured. The trees in the orchard, and the untrimmed hedges outside the fence, were leafless, but the black twigs were fat to bursting. A persistent rain! But to-morrow might be the turning-point of the seasons. The air was warm and wet. Perhaps the boisterous March gales were buried.

She looked at the barn outside, with its grey, falling timbers, and its lichened roof. She looked at the hills beyond. They were so wrapped in mist that they merged into the soft sky. She shuddered. They bound her round like a zone. They shut her off from the world. Her mother had often looked at them with just such helpless enmity.

She said sadly to herself, with a kind of pitying wonder:—

“I’m young—is it twenty-five or twenty-six next birthday? My head is stupid.”

Then she looked at the borders where the miracles were becoming individualised—lettuce-green tufts of white lily, thick clumps of phloxes like clenched fists, rough-leaved hollyhocks.

She said again:—

“I am quite young; a woman under thirty may call herself young. And I might have been so happy. I know how to enjoy myself.”

She picked a primrose,—it was creamy-brown with a white spot,—and held it to her nose, sensuously snuffing up the “winey” smell.

“It is such a beautiful world,” she murmured, with a half sob. “And I could have been so happy—happier than any one alive—if I had only had the chance.”

She dropped the flower to the bricks.

There was a quick flash of the old unquenchable, whimsical fun in her eyes. Life was a jest. A perennial, terrible jest.

She was young. She exhaled all the strength and beauty of young womanhood: her skin, which was smooth and clear, the hair which grew low and thick on her temples, and at the nape of her white neck, her strong teeth, and supple wrists. It was very hard to have to wind up everything at twenty-five—or was it twenty-six?

The reproachful cawing from the fowl-run roused her. She went across the orchard, rain overhead, sodden grass under foot, and got the bags of grain. She stood —

looked at the black mother-bird thoughtfully as it pecked.

The long fluty whistle of an engine was carried across the fields. It only came so far when the wind was in a certain quarter. It was the whistle of the 3.25 train from London.

She went back to the brick path, and looked with all her heart at the retreating hills a little longer — while Mrs. Megson beat down the flyman, and Mrs. Jade, half dreading the effect that her rebellious move of yesterday might have on her social relations, floundered among the muddy ruts in the lane leading down to the Five Yew.

Harriott went into the house at last. She went slowly, shutting and bolting the door behind her with a certain air of finality, and going with lagging feet upstairs.

POSTSCRIPT

POLLY had come to tea by appointment, and Owen was to drop in to supper—they liked to drink tea in that solid, prearranged fashion at Brixton.

"It was a great shock to me," Mrs. Megson said, shaking her lustreless head. "It is so seldom that you hear of grown-up people catching measles, but when they do it goes hard—Harriott never had them as a child. Do have a piece of shortbread, Polly my dear. It is the real, old-fashioned shortbread; Mr. Megson brings it home from a place in the City."

Polly took a shortbread. Her long teeth closed on it with a sort of snap.

"So she was at loggerheads with her husband all the time," she said, with a graveyard air of gusto. "Whoever would have thought it?"

"He behaved abominably," Mrs. Megson cried with much wrath. "How could she help the child being born wrong? Mr. Megson wrote and asked him if he would come to the funeral, but we've never had a line from that day to this."

"It's a shame," said Polly, vigorously. "I never cared for him. How long was she ill?"

"Only two days, and I never got a single word of sense out of her all the time. I shall never forget those two days, no, not if I live to be a hundred. There's the poor, afflicted child lying dead in one room and

riott dying in the other. Just fancy! She was born at that house. Of course Dr. Owens has told you everything."

"Everything," emphasised Polly, with the snarling curl of nose and lip.

"And she went back there quite by accident. And then some people say there isn't a Providence watching over us. She lived there on her thirty-five pounds a year, while Daniel was in the lap of luxury. That money comes to me. It isn't much, but it's something. It isn't nice to go to your husband for every penny. Mr. Megson is a most peculiar man in some things."

"It was a very lonely house, wasn't it?" asked Polly.

"Terrible. And the mud! You never saw such mud. My best winter skirt would have been completely ruined, only as luck would have it, I was able to have it dyed black for mourning, and I wear it about the house. There is a pond near. There were a lot of dangerous, fierce-looking cows drinking at it. One put down its head at me in the most threatening way—I'm certain it was a bull. My legs would hardly carry me. When at last I did reach the house I had quite a bother to get in. Harriott had locked the door and seemed afraid to open it. She put her head out of the window at last—such pokey windows, only slits in the walls—and when she saw me she screamed. It was the most piercing, unearthly cry; you could have heard it a mile off. It didn't sound human. My blood ran cold at the sound of it. And when she came down at last, she threw herself into my arms and cried as if her poor heart would break. Daniel ought to be punished by law."

"It's a shame," repeated Polly, full of sympathy for a woman who was past harming her.

"And didn't anybody come near? Weren't there any neighbours? Surely the people across the way—"

"There was only a barn across the way. A woman came once—the charwoman. She came to say her mother was dead. Her mother turned out to be Mrs. Gatley, who nursed my sister Rosalie when Harriott was born. She must have been very old. But they all mix up down there and live on for ever. Things are altogether different; nothing seems to change. The Five Yew was just the same. The same dismal-looking trees at the side, the same great brick hearth in the parlour. You never saw anything like it in your life."

"And nobody came?" Polly persisted, with her needle-like air of inquisitiveness.

"I never saw a soul except the charwoman and a lady who was dawdling up and down the lane leading to the Five Yew—the flyman wouldn't drive, it is such a bad road. She stared very hard. When I got to the gate I looked back. She was standing stock still, and staring harder than ever. When I got to the door, I looked again and she had turned back and was walking quite briskly towards the road."

There was a pause. Mrs. Megson looked sentimentally at the mantel border. It was of serge roughly worked with flowers in crewel wool. It had been Harriott's first and last essay at fancy-work. Then she said:—

"It has quite upset me. Mr. Megson is going to take his holiday earlier this year; the air of Margate is so good and always sets me up."

"You were away more than a week?"

"Yes, it was very good of Mr. Megson to let me stay so long. For you know that a man misses his little comforts when his wife is away, and Jane was laid up half the time. Harriott was neither kith nor kin to him; and it put off our entertainment, of course. Be sure you come to the next. I must send you a card. It is Monday week, remember."

"Did Miss Cramp make your mourning?" Polly asked, taking another piece of shortbread.

"Yes." Mrs. Megson showed considerable interest and energy. "Do you think she did it well? I fancied myself that it dragged a little across the back. She is all right for skirts, but I never care for her bodices, though, to be sure, she made all poor Harriott's trousseau."

She stood up and writhed and wriggled a little before the glass at the back of the sideboard, trying to get a full view of the expanse between her plump shoulders. Polly rose, too, with her head on one side and her hands very lightly set against her hips.

"I think," she said critically at last, with her mouth half full of cake, "that it would be all right if you made her slope it out a little at the armholes. That's what she had to do with my blue alpaca."

They went back to the table and subsided into toast and shortbread. The fire winked complacently. The last cup of tea in the pot was always the best, Mrs. Megson thought, as she dribbled it into her own cup when Polly declined any more.

"We buried her in the grave with her father and mother," she said, "and the child, too. It was so

small that they could almost have gone into one coffin. They don't often bury at Barly Bridge now, but Mr. Megson got permission. He didn't think it worth while to go to the expense of having her brought to London, and I wanted her to lie there with all her father's people. The churchyard is full of Wickens. You never saw anything like it."

"And is the house let?" asked Polly. "What sort of house is it? A double-fronted house like ours? And what style is it in: the Elizabethan or the Queen Anne?"

"It's quite different to anything at Brixton," Mrs. Megson said, with an infinite pity and contempt for the Five Yew. "Double-fronted? Well, you might call it so — there is a room each side of the front door."

"Well, that's a double-fronted house."

"A gloomy, ramshackle old place!" Mrs. Megson said viciously. "It is going to be pulled down, so the undertaker told Mr. Megson. And quite the best thing that could happen to it. The gentleman who owns the property all round about is always making improvements."

She bustled up as the clock struck.

"I'll just run out and see if she has put a bit of soda in the greens," she said. "I do hate to see them come to table a bad colour. And I'm not going to stand on ceremony with you, Polly. There's the paper on the sideboard."

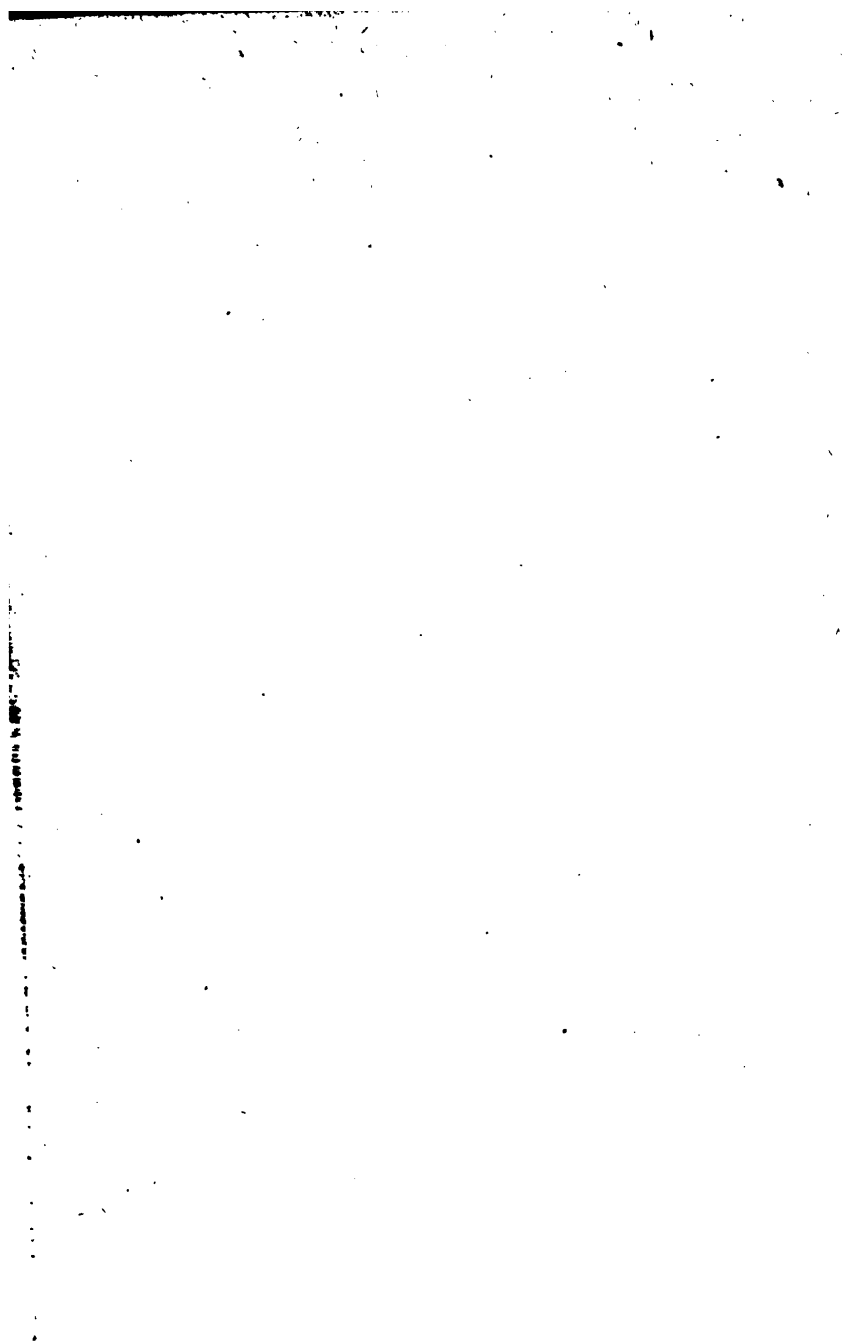
Polly took it up. Presently she gave a little shrill squeak, which brought Mrs. Megson bustling in from the kitchen. Polly held the paper out with her finger on a paragraph.

"What do you think of that for a downright, heartless bit of cheek?" she snarled.

Mrs. Megson read:—

"DARNELL—CHANCE. On the third inst., at St. Olave's, Kensington, Daniel Darnell to Ann Chance."

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